

# Bandwagon

THE JOURNAL OF THE CIRCUS HISTORICAL SOCIETY, INC.

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### THE FRONT COVER

Adam Forepaugh, Jr. (1861-1919) was a gifted animal trainer, especially with elephants. However he was a pain around his father's circus, acting big and frequently trying to draw money from the ticket wagon.

The 1889 Adam Forepaugh Jr. Circus poster on the cover was printed by the Courier Company. It was a winter show as he appeared with his father's circus during the summer season. It is from the John and Mable Ringling Museum, Tibbals digital collection.

### THE BACK COVER

These two Adam Forepaugh show lithographs featured elephants presented by Adam Forepaugh, Jr. Both are from John and Mable Ringling Museum, Tibbals digital collection.

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# Charles Sparks: Circus Wagon Buyer

By Fred Dahlinger, Jr.

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The Sparks Circus was among the most highly regarded and universally respected three-ring operations in 20<sup>th</sup> century outdoor show business. It was supported, endorsed and applauded by an array of admirers that ranged from local citizens and elected officials to the men who owned the pinnacle of tented shows, the Ringling brothers. The Sparks aggregation reinforced traditional practices and solid values and provided the quintessential circus experience for Americans fortunate enough to have experienced it during its heyday.

Charles Sparks, though only a co-owner, was the real heart of the show and knew the business from the ground up. Starting as a child performer, he rose to manager and proprietor, becoming the latter when his slightly older mentor and eventual partner, John H. Wiseman, was still living. Following Wiseman's 1903 death, Charlie personally led the development of the Sparks circus into one of the premier tent shows of its time. It was not the biggest by any measure, but it was a powerhouse of prosperity. The market standing of the Sparks operation is attested to by the premium price that was paid for the title, property and good will when it was sold in 1929. Charles Sparks was proof that a circus man could be a "nice guy," a good boss and a shrewd business man all at the same time.

This essay encompasses all of the data that could reasonably be obtained concerning the acquisition of wagons for the Sparks show. Given the excellence of his asset management and financial success, there is good reason to review the manner in which Charlie Sparks went about assembling his wagon fleet and in particular the parade vehicles that formed the bulk of the important daily street presentation.

When the Sparks Circus came to town, most residents gave it their attention, many first experiencing it via the grand parade that was staged every day. Fig. 1

## Sparks Circus Parade Overview

With the exception of several musical novelties added in the 1910s, the American circus parade had reached a mature and fixed format by the first time that the Sparks show staged street processions in 1891. That's the year when a bandwagon is first mentioned. No description or image of that conveyance has been discovered. The content and length of the Sparks daily street demonstration grew modestly through the 1890s and early 1900s, but it did not take on truly large proportions until the 1910s. By then it was a splendid rolling spectacle that was eagerly awaited by its dedicated audience of committed customers.

The earliest Sparks parade that can be delineated and analyzed is depicted in one of several circa 1906 show photographs. Fig. 2 The elements seen therein include: the owner's single pony carriage; a band chariot with a four horse team, the horses draped with blankets bearing the Sparks name; one small carved ticket wagon that doubled as a tableau; two female and two male mounted riders; a pair of small, closed cross cages with two-horse teams; several ring ponies that served as lead stock; three larger cross cages (in a sequence of open, closed and open) with two-horse hitches; and a small Asiatic elephant with a top rider. While this might appear to be a modest effort, it

was all staged by a five-car circus, with the parade wagons, at least two large baggage wagons and all of the animals and trappings loading into an 80-foot tunnel car and onto a single 60-foot flat car. Charlie Sparks knew how to maximize the efficient use of his railroad transport.

The splendor and quality of the Sparks parade grew in step with the general size of the show. A steam calliope was added in 1910, followed by a box-body bandwagon by 1911 and three larger tableaux in 1913. The number of elephants increased, lead stock was added and in general the length of the march expanded considerably. It was a colorful, eye-filling spectacle; one could argue that it defined the quintessential American circus street parade.

In 1916, the Sparks Circus opening day parade featured no less than three musical groups, including the big show band, a clown band led by a dwarf and the black side show band. Led by a new bandwagon, the season's opening march included: fourteen wild animal dens; mounted riders; an air calliope; an older band-

**Fig. 1** The Sparks Circus built a large, dedicated audience by providing the public with high-quality entertainment year after year. The downtown sidewalks were packed whenever this show staged a parade. Joseph T. Bradbury collection.







**Fig. 2** The entire Sparks circus, including the train, can be discerned in this circa 1906 photograph documenting the parade ready to leave the lot. Albert Conover collection.

wagon; five elephants; camels; cowgirls from the Buckskin Ben's Wild West concert; and a new steam calliope. All of Salisbury, North Carolina, site of the winter quarters, turned out, the city having literally closed its doors on Circus Day so that people could view the march, attend the matinee and give the show a rousing send-off. The parade was led by Mr. and Mrs. Sparks, Chief of Police Miller and Frank Miller, all four riding in the latter's big touring car. The boss hostler, Jim Jacobs, followed on a horse, along with two costumed ladies, gentlemen and riders with bugles. The new bandwagon, with Jack Phillips bandmen in new wardrobe and helmets, came next. Closed and open dens and male and female riders in new red plush uniforms were followed by an air calliope, completing the first section of the parade. The second section was led by a bevy of pretty ladies and handsome men in green uniforms on horseback. More open and closed dens followed, along with tableaux, the side show band and the clown band. The reporter's favorite was a pure white tandem team driven by an expert lady driver. Then came clowns on horseback, the cowboy and Wild West concert contingent, tableaux, the elephants, camels and the steam calliope. Though red appears to have been Charlie Sparks favorite parade wagon color, a report from 1916 indicates that the parade was populated with wagons painted red, blue, green and yellow, all varnished to protect them from the elements and sporting American flags on the corners. The Sparks presentation was hallmarked by color, music and good wishes from its hometown.<sup>1</sup>

The zenith of Sparks parades was reached in the 1920s, with those like

the one staged in Granite City, Illinois on September 8, 1923, representing the ultimate.<sup>2</sup> The street demonstration included: three bandwagons (No. 1 in red and gold; clown bandwagon; and the side show bandwagon); one tableau; an air calliope (red) and a steam calliope (red). All ten of the cages were open and seen therein were ostriches, axis deer, tigers, monkeys, kangaroos, polar bears, seals, leopards, lions, and black leopards. Cage colors were noted as orange, green, dark blue or black with silver carvings, red, yellow, blue, and white. The march commenced with a pair of mounted heralds with American flags, with following mounted units including sixteen riders, pairs of two-horse and three-horse tandems, a clown mule tandem, four Wild West participants and a zebra tandem.

The lead stock included three camels and there were six Asiatic elephants. Eighty-two horses and eight ponies pulled the wagon entries. There were no singularly outstanding elements in the Sparks presentation, but it was a solid, traditional circus parade with great color, broad animal representation, five entertaining musical units and a good complement of well-maintained wagons. Paced well, it would have been a pleasure to witness it moving through the streets of any city. Coupled with the quality of the circus that it represented, it is little wonder why the Sparks Circus earned a reputation as a favorite of many Americans.

### Sparks Wagon Purchases

Charles Sparks favored at least four different vehicle builders with his orders for parade wagon work. They included three well-known firms and one rather obscure manufacturer. Little is known about the baggage wagons that transported his equipment. No records have been located specifying their manufacturer until the 1920s. It would be rational to surmise that the men who fabricated his parade wagons also furnished the more utilitarian vehicles. That was the case during the last decade of the show's existence and likely an indication of prior practice. Baggage wagon orders didn't provide the excitement that new parade features did in trade paper reporting, and thus were seldom mentioned.

In general, Charlie Sparks followed the pack, buying from vehicle makers that had an established track record. The first orders that we know about were given by Sparks to Sullivan & Eagle of Peru, Indiana. Theodore J. Sullivan (1840-1920) and Henry A. Eagle (1850-1938) commenced doing circus work for Ben Wallace (1847-1921) by 1889 and made a fine impression by building band, cage and ticket wagons for the multiple Gentry Bros. dog and pony shows at the turn of the century. They also fabricated a number of quality steam calliopes. Over about a six year period, circa 1905 to 1910, Sparks essentially ordered one of everything that Sullivan & Eagle supplied to traveling showmen.

The second firm that he favored with an order, Herbert L. Witt & Sons of Morristown, Tennessee, is all but forgotten today. Witt (c.1851-1915) generally made wagons for smaller overland shows and others



on the rise, like Sparks. Surprisingly, because Charles Sparks sold it away, the only wagon from his circus existing today is one of those fabricated by Witt.<sup>3</sup>

The Bode Wagon Company, a significant Cincinnati brewery wagon builder, did a very big trade in circus vehicles between 1900 and 1910. Thereafter their activity declined as they progressively converted to motor truck body work. Perhaps Albert Bode (1869-1928) solicited the Sparks orders as filler when he agreed to make a steam calliope, at least one cage, a ticket wagon, a tableau and perhaps some baggage wagons for Sparks in 1916. Charlie Sparks must have been trying to upgrade the quality of his parade with these robust Cincinnati-made vehicles. The seller and customer relationship must have been good, as Sparks later ordered three large dens from Bode in 1923.

Few wagon makers remained in business in the 1920s, most having turned their attention to truck body manufacturing. Henry C. Moeller, Jr. (1868-1957) and his brother, Corwin G. (1872-1946), located off the beaten path in Baraboo, Wisconsin, made a few of their specialized stake drivers for circuses in the 1910s, but generally their core work was done for their cousins, the Ringlings. Possibly as a special favor, Moeller Brothers accepted several commissions from Sparks in the 1920s. The work was something of a last hurrah for a firm that had moved on to other work in post-horse power America. Sparks favored the Moellers with no less than four different orders for over a dozen wagons during a seven-year period.

In addition to new wagons, there is documentation for two negotiations of second hand wagons. The first was never consummated, while the second did transpire and involved two cross cages and a seal den, bought from circus broker William P. Hall (1864-1932) of Lancaster, Missouri, in 1914. Given the abundance of used circus chattel nearly always available, one suspects that after he was well-established Sparks thought the best practice was to buy new. The methodology appears to have served him well, as many fellow showmen

who bought second hand were unsuccessful. Inexperienced proprietors who launched *entirely* new circuses with *all* new equipment appear to have been challenged to survive. Fragmentary upgrading, wherein capital was spread across a variety of areas to maintain or improve uniformly, as practiced by Sparks and other showmen, was a time-tested management technique for success.

### The Sullivan & Eagle Wagons

The best known manufacturer of smaller show vehicles was Sullivan & Eagle of Peru, Indiana. Their enduring fame is secure because they achieved a particular style of construction that is recognizable a century later. Helping to confirm their popularity as a builder of high repute are many photographs of their conveyances taken over a long span of years. The majority of their wagons were utilized with better quality circuses, dog and pony shows and Wild West aggregations, a general testimony to their quality and value. The firm's clientele included Great Wallace, Gentry Bros., Pawnee Bill and others, in addition to Sparks.

Written confirmation of a Sparks order to the builder has yet to be located. One surmises that a referral may have come from Henry B. Gentry (1864-1940), the leader of the four brothers who once fielded an equal number dog and pony shows. He was reputedly a good friend of Sparks. The Gentry outfit bought multiple bandwagons, steam calliopes, ticket wagons, cages and other parade chariots from the firm in the early 1900s. The Gentry satisfaction and presumed recommendation may have been a factor in Sparks' selection of the firm. There is an unproven and undocumented legend alleging some of the early Sparks parade wagons originated with one of the Gentry units. As they merged operations and pared

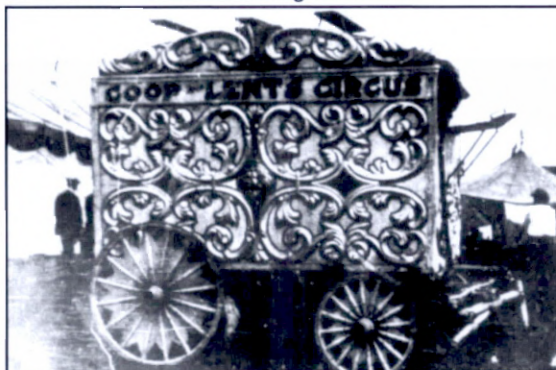


**Fig. 3** Sullivan and Eagle of Peru, Indiana built the Sparks bandchariot, which later served on a Tom Finn show and the Heber Bros. circus about 1915. Maurice Allaire collection.

down from four to two shows, excess Gentry equipment may have rendered a number of pieces surplus. The appearance of the Sparks wagons is entirely different from those that can be affiliated with the dog and pony operators. No confirmation for a Gentry to Sparks transaction has been located, nor can any equipment be positively traced from one show to the other.

The only bandchariot-type bandwagon known to have been owned by Sparks and that has been identified as such appears for the first time in a parade picture dated "winter 1905." The wagon can also be seen in a lot scene that has been tentatively marked as 1906.<sup>4</sup> Fig. 3 It is last found on Sparks in a 1911 photograph. It was the bandwagon offered for sale by Sparks, along with two

**Fig. 4** Sparks housed his ticket selling and presumably the office function in this small and elegantly decorated wagon that later went to Thomas Finn's Great Eastern and finally with Coop & Lent. Pfening Archives.







**Fig. 5** Another nicely decorated Sparks wagon from Sullivan & Eagle was this tableau with scrolls and figures. It was used on Finn's Uncle Tom show. John F. Polacsek collection.

cross cages, a ticket wagon and a tableau, in late 1912. The lot was specified as being of Sullivan & Eagle manufacture. Except for the longer bandwagon they all loaded crosswise on the flat cars. The bandwagon would have been judged disposable at the conclusion of the 1912 tour as Sparks arranged for the construction of three new box-body parade wagons for 1913, each of which could carry a band in parade and also a load of baggage between stands.<sup>5</sup>

The small ticket wagon is readily seen in the 1906 lot scene, towards the center, also in 1910 views of the front door and street parade.<sup>6</sup> Fig. 4 The tableau, with two carved figures on each side, is at an oblique angle to the camera in the parade mount, a perspective that prevents ready analysis. It can only be identified from later images. Fig. 5

By early 1913, most of the Sparks wagons, for certain the ticket wagon and tableau, went to Thomas L. Finn, an Uncle Tom's Cabin show operator out of Hoosick Falls, New York. Finn was then in the process of launching his Great Eastern Shows, a circus that endured just a single season.<sup>7</sup> For 1914 Finn reverted back to his reliable and profitable Tom show operation. Early in the year he placed a number of wagons up for sale. These included a carved bandwagon with four mirrors that cost \$800, but which could be had for \$150, and a \$700 tableau for \$150.<sup>8</sup> He circulated photographs of each vehicle in an attempt to sell them,

images that are now the best available photos of the two wagons. The ticket wagon was later part of the wagon fleet on the Coop & Lent railroad circus operation of 1916-1917, and perhaps Hugo Bros. the year before.

By 1915, the ex-Sparks bandwagon was with the Heber Bros. Circus of Columbus, Ohio, a transfer confirmed by the presence of photographs of the vehicle in the Heber Bros. archives preserved by descendants Robert and Brian R. Heber.<sup>9</sup> The Heber brothers operation formally entered the circus business about 1907-1908. There were four bonafide brothers: Benjamin C., George T., Reginald C. and Rollo H.; one sister, Elizabeth Rose; and their parents, Reginald C., known as "Pop," and Abbie Rose. They were all active in the business. They simply abandoned field show activity after the



**Fig. 6** Photographs of the Sparks steam calliope from Sullivan & Eagle are very rare, this enlargement being taken from a much larger lot scene. Dave Price collection.

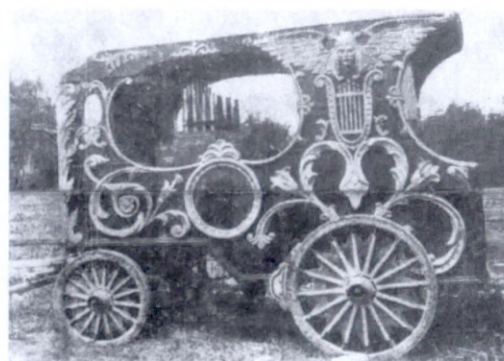
1917 season, when World War I conditions exasperated the hiring of workingmen. Possibly without having sought proper clearance, George W. Christy used the Heber Bros. title on a two-car circus that he operated in 1919, but it does not appear that any of the physical plant passed to him.<sup>10</sup> On November 24, 1914, circus owner J. H. Eschman (1861?-1934) wrote the Heber Bros. inquiring about the "old Sparks Band-Wagon that you purchased of Thos. Finn." It is unknown if the Hebers sold the wagon at a

later date to Eschman. The equipment offered at the January 30, 1918 sale of the Eschman circus did not include anything identifiable as the former Sparks wagon.<sup>11</sup>

The first Sparks steam calliope that can be authoritatively confirmed was acquired for the 1910 tour. Fig. 6 It was one of the shorter machines made by Sullivan & Eagle and may have been the last one they furnished to a traveling show. Though someone told the press in 1910 that it had 32 whistles, a man that played it, Fletcher Smith (1869-1944), clarified that it had only 21, a size compatible with the short length of the wagon.<sup>12</sup> The instrument was manufactured by the Thomas J. Nichol Company of Cincinnati, Ohio. This particular calliope served as the traditional final unit in the Sparks march through 1915. The best available photograph of the calliope, as originally built, was printed in *Billboard*, December 16, 1911 (page 28), but it also appears, inconsequentially, in a 1911 photograph taken at Claremont, New Hampshire.<sup>13</sup> Fletcher Smith faked his way through one season at the keyboard and then Lester A. Bartlett (1886?-1979) came on in 1911 and played it for the next three seasons thereafter.

For 1915, Sparks bought one of the newly devised Tangley Manufacturing Company "Calliaphones," a 43-whistle, low-pressure air calliope made in Muscatine, Iowa.<sup>14</sup> It was essentially a clone of

**Fig. 7** The 1910 Sparks steam calliope was modified to house a 43-whistle Tangley Calliaphone in 1915. The image is from a Tangley broadside in the author's collection.





the calliopes that had been built previously by Joseph Ori for a number of years. Sparks replaced the steam boiler and instrument in the Sullivan & Eagle wagon with the new Tangley and Roots blower and proclaimed it as being a great improvement. Fig. 7 To protect the calliope, a roof was built over the central open area of the wagon and the position formerly occupied by the boiler was fitted with a wooden panel. Long-time circus musician and ticket seller Lester Bartlett was the first person to play the new Calliaphone on the show, remaining in place through 1916. The newspaper in Salisbury, North Carolina, where the show wintered and opened in the spring of 1915, confirmed the presence of "the new air calliope which replaced the old steam piano."<sup>15</sup>

Why Sparks dropped the louder steam machine for an air-powered one is unknown, but a possible explanation is available. In his 1934 memoir, Fletcher Smith indicated that he once played the Sparks steam calliope in a midnight Christmas parade to serenade U. S. Senator Lee Slater Overman (1854-1930, who served 1902-1930). The event was staged in Salisbury, North Carolina, the show's winter quarters from 1910-1911 to 1915-1916, and again 1918-1919. Smith's tenure with Sparks lasted from 1910 to 1916 inclusive, starting as calliope player and reserved seat and concert ticket seller. From other knowledge, the events to be related could not have occurred any later than the winter of 1914 to 1915.

It is documented that the citizens of Salisbury celebrated Christmas Eve 1911 in a novel way, commencing at midnight with the tooting of tin horns and the lighting of firecrackers. Soon thereafter, the Sparks steam calliope and a six horse hitch navigated its way to the business district, awakening anyone within earshot of it. It could have been during an event like this that the following incident occurred, as related by calliope player Smith. In an attempt to increase the boiler heat output and raise steam quicker, the careless fireman threw a dipper full of kerosene, or at least what he thought was that liquid fuel, into the firebox.

It was actually gasoline that he applied to the coal fire. The resulting explosion and fire severely damaged the calliope, according to Smith, with the frightened horses running away to Spencer, three miles away.<sup>16</sup> Approximately the same story about the calliope mishap was related by Mrs. Clifton Wiseman to her niece and her husband, Grey and Kevin Carle, who later related it to



**Fig. 8** The lead bandwagon of the 1911 Sparks show was this vehicle, diminutive by comparison to the wagon that provided the basic concept. Albert Conover collection.

Salisbury historian Paul Bernhardt.<sup>17</sup>

If the damage to the boiler and instrument was as severe as Smith claimed, it may have been easier and cheaper to replace the steamer. At the time, a boiler and 32-whistle calliope cost in the vicinity of \$450, whereas a Tangley Calliaphone and gas engine would have been about

**Fig. 9** This gigantic Leonhardt-built tableau, from the 1910 Norris & Rowe outfit, inspired the much smaller vehicle supplied to the Sparks circus in 1911. Author's collection.



\$400. The air calliope could also augment the band during the big top performance and was likely cheaper to operate. No fireman was necessary and the engine powering it consumed gasoline instead of coal. The changeover may have reflected a conservative side of Sparks; he would not want to see his valued customers and employees placed in an unsafe position by a steam calliope. Sparks,

always a cautious and careful operator, may have decided, at least temporarily, that it was worth replacing the steamer with the pneumatic device. In just two years he reversed his decision, realizing the traditional steam calliope was a parade necessity. Regardless of the capital cost and expense advantage, a steam calliope was a circus tradition and a new one was ordered by Sparks for 1916.

The former Sullivan & Eagle calliope wagon continued to serve as a conveyance for the Tangley air calliope as late as 1917. The date is supported by references to two calliopes in Sparks parades until that time.<sup>18</sup> Carvings mounted on the side of the wagon, one in the shape of a lyre and the other a winged head that may have been inspired by the mythological god Mercury, were removed and applied to a Bode-built tableau that Sparks acquired for 1918. The transfer confirms that the Sullivan & Eagle calliope wagon was dismantled and the parts recycled during the winter of 1917-1918.

The first box body bandwagon owned by the Sparks show is recorded in a photograph taken at Claremont, New Hampshire on August 12, 1911. Fig. 8 The photo has also been dated 1909, but the presence of the steam calliope that was new in 1910 precludes the earlier year.<sup>19</sup> Two large, carved griffins and three mirrors embellished each side. There is good reason to presume that the



design was derived from a much larger tableau that had been constructed the year before by the Leonhardt Wagon Manufacturing Company of Baltimore, Maryland for the Norris & Rowe Trained Wild Animal Show. The Norris & Rowe wagons were highly publicized at the time, being parked out front of the Baltimore City Hall on April 4, 1910, where they were photographed.<sup>20</sup> Following the show's closing, the Norris & Rowe chattel was shipped to Ben Wallace's farm outside of Peru, Indiana, where it was stored from May 1910 until an auction was held on August 6th. It was during that three-month period when someone observed it and decided to copy it for a 1911 Sparks vehicle. Fig. 9 The grandness of the big Leonhardt wagons may have convinced local builder Sullivan & Eagle to clone a facsimile on a smaller scale featuring the same design elements. We attribute it to Sullivan & Eagle, the firm that furnished vehicles to Sparks in previous years, but specific confirmation is not available. The skyboard decorative design, incorporating two mammals or rodents and scrollwork, was later copied by Bode for a cage they furnished to Sparks in 1916.<sup>21</sup>

This bandwagon and three or four small cages were sold by Sparks and became part of the Rhoda Royal Circus of 1920 to 1922. On the Royal outfit the bandwagon served as the chandelier wagon and seldom paraded according to the recollection of

**Fig. 10** The mule cart and the two 1913 Witt-built tableaux were in the Sparks parades, as was the tableau cage seen over the right shoulder of the clown. Robert A. and Brian R. Heber collection, CWM.



**Fig. 11** This 1913-built tableau, which also served as a ticket wagon, was originally white or yellow, but was painted red with yellow undergear in later years. Author's photo.

Col. William H. Woodcock, although the one available photograph shows it in the daily march.<sup>22</sup> The bandwagon and cages conceivably served on a railroad carnival in the 1920s before being dismantled or destroyed.



**Fig. 12** The central dragon figures of this Witt-built tableau match those that were placed on the Rose Kilian bandwagon fabricated a year later. Photograph by J. J. Ruff, 1916.

Like most small shows, the Sparks operation had a fleet of small cross cages to house their menagerie of caged beasts. Most were probably made by Sullivan & Eagle and dated to the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, or perhaps before. They were adequately small to fit inside a tunnel car when

that form of conveyance carried all of the show's parade wagons in the early 1900s. The last of the cross cages were reportedly sold off the Sparks show in 1920.<sup>23</sup>

### The Herbert L. Witt & Sons Wagons

Morristown, Tennessee wagon maker Herbert L. Witt furnished three box body tableau wagons to Sparks for 1913. It ultimately became the most important commission that the firm ever received from a circus owner. The order was announced in January 1913. An erroneous account later specified that a tableau bandwagon and two large tableau cages would be manufactured by a Knoxville firm. Witt had a relation of sorts with the larger community.<sup>24</sup> As it turned out, the order was for three tableaux, including one that doubled as a ticket and office wagon. One of the tableaux, with two figures on each side can be identified because the pairs of griffins also affixed on it were duplicated for the Rose Kilian bandwagon that Witt constructed the next year.<sup>25</sup> The Sparks tableau that had imaginative and simply executed creatures on the side and also served as the show's ticket wagon from 1913 onward shares front panel carvings in common with the two-figure tableau. The third tableau of the three, with a featured center statue and much scrollwork, is assigned to the Witt order by a process of elimination.

The combination tableau and ticket wagon appears in a 1913 photograph of the Sparks midway. Its construction was anticipated as the previous ticket wagon was offered for sale in December 1912. Initially it was painted white or light yellow and had either a lift-up type ticket window or horizontally-split rear doors, something of a Dutch-door arrangement. On the right side was a personnel access door and towards the rear of each side was a shallow ventilation port, near the roof line, that could be opened for occupant comfort. In at least one season the





**Fig. 13** The sun was shining brightly on both riders and spectators when Marion Organ snapped this photograph of another of the 1913 Witt-built tabs in the Sparks parade at Wilmington, Ohio. Author's collection.

wagon was assigned the number 20. In later years the wagon was painted a dark color, likely the red body with gold-leafed carvings and yellow undergears that Sparks favored. Fig. 10

It served the Sparks show as late as 1922, when it was still reportedly used as a ticket wagon. Circus owner Floyd King (1888-1976) went from his Louisville, Kentucky winter quarters to visit Charlie Sparks in the latter's Macon, Georgia quarters during the winter of 1922-1923. Sparks was upgrading from 15 to 20 railroad cars and wanted to dispose of his smaller wagons, exemplified by the Witt-built tableaux. King bought the ticket wagon and also a set of four, wooden hub wagon wheels that he used as the basis for a new light plant wagon. King utilized the wagon on some of his 1920s railroad shows. It never toured with a viable circus thereafter, but experienced public service

**Fig. 14** The corner carvings and the unusual cage construction suggest that this cage may have been constructed by Witt for the 1914 Sparks tour. W. H. B. Jones photograph, 1919.



at the railroad fair in Chicago before reaching preservation. When the wagon was reconstructed in recent years, the physical configuration and decorative scheme reflected the wagon's service on Sparks.<sup>26</sup> Fig. 11

The two tableaux featuring carved, Mayan-like figures on their sides appear in photographs taken of the Sparks parade by Marion Organ at Wilmington, Ohio on August 27, 1913 or August 30, 1916. Fig. 12 The one with two figures and griffins on the side was assigned the number 22 and remained in use through 1921. Some have observed that the wagon remained stored in the three years commencing in 1922, but a 1923 photo shows the wagon on the Sparks lot. It was sold to Floyd King for 1925 and served on a number of his railroad outfits.<sup>27</sup>

The third Witt tableau, the one with a single statue, was with Sparks through 1921. Fig. 13 Knowing that the two other Witt tableaux were numbered 20 and 22, it's likely that this one bore the number 21 or 24. Col. William H. Woodcock was told in the spring of 1922 at Sparks winter quarters that a tableau and some cages had been sold and shipped to Andrew Downie, who was then operating a circus with the Walter L. Main title. There's no available photographic evidence that the tableau ever served on a Downie show, but it's also not confirmed on Sparks. One surviving photograph records the wagon with the number 65 on the front, perhaps a Downie assignment. Two of the cages that passed from Sparks to Downie are photographically documented on both shows, being on the Downie outfit by 1923.

It's likely that one or more Sparks cross cages were also included in the Downie deal as they last appear in Sparks photography about 1920. One of them had been pulled by two camels in parade.<sup>28</sup>

Though no written documentation has been found, it is thought that Witt may have also furnished at least one animal

den to Sparks. An early 1914 news item refers to three new cages being added and they could have come from Witt.<sup>29</sup> A lion den photographed by W. H. B. Jones on the show at Hattiesburg, Mississippi on September 15, 1919 has corner carvings done in the Witt style. Fig. 14 This somewhat ungainly looking cage, with small diameter wheels under a squat body, was likely sold to others when new twelve foot cages were acquired in the early 1920s.



**Fig. 15** This simple cage with a tank was the seal den that Sparks bought from William P. Hall before the 1914 tour. W. H. B. Jones photograph. 1919.

#### William P. Hall Deals

Correspondence survives that confirms a business relationship between Charles Sparks and horse dealer and circus broker William P. Hall of Lancaster, Missouri from as early as 1908 to as late as 1923. As one would expect, few of the exchanges relate to wagon matters. Most pertain to the horses and elephants that were the typical focus of Hall's many circus dealings.

The first wagon deal was posed in late 1912, when Sparks wrote his horse-trading friend "Kindly let me know what you have in the way of tableaux band wagons and other show stuff. I am thinking of putting on two more cars."<sup>30</sup> Sparks eventually visited Hall's farm and advised him by letter on November 26, 1912 that "I have been doing quite a lot of thinking since I left . . . [.] Now, I have given up the idea of adding two more cars but I can use the Green tableau band wagon, that is, the first wagon as you go in the building. One is white and gold, the other is blue and gold and the other green. The green wagon is not so heavily carved as the



white one. . . . Now make me your very lowest cash price on the above stuff. . . . I want you to give me your very lowest price on this stuff and in the same time figure that I will always buy my stock of you and do you all the good I can." Despite Sparks' plea, Hall's price must not have been low enough because the showman ordered the three new tableau wagons from Witt for the spring of 1913.

Sparks tried to make another deal with Hall in late 1913. He wrote Diamond Billy on Christmas Eve, 1913, stating "I would like to enlarge the show. Now what is the very best price on the two small elephants, one camel, the two cross cages, the seal cage and the Buffalo Bill band-



**Fig. 16** The heritage of the seal den as a circa 1902 Forepaugh-Sells tableau cage is readily evident when this circa 1906 photo is compared to the 1919 view. Albert Conover collection.

wagon?" This time the numbers worked, at least partially, with Sparks sending Hall a confirming note on December 30, 1913.

"Remember the two cross cages I picked out in the building, also the seal cage." After the vehicles arrived, Sparks complained to Hall in a February 14, 1914 missive that "the harness is satisfactory but the cross cages are very bad. I will have to get them repaired up and will have to paint them over again." The final deal excluded the vehicle identified as the Buffalo Bill band wagon.

Most wagon authorities looking at the circumstances would suggest that Hall and Sparks were confused about the bandwagon's identification. It would be assumed that they had mistakenly identified the 1866

Fielding-built Van Amburgh bandchariot that later served on the Barnum show, which was indeed at the Hall farm, as having been on Buffalo Bill's Wild West. A different Fielding bandchariot, the 1870s to 1890s Forepaugh lion, was the one used on the Cody outfit during 1895-1902. It appears in the 1898 Edison film recording the Buffalo Bill street parade. Fred Buchanan had it on his Yankee Robinson circus in the later 1910s and it would seem that Hall had no ability to sell it to Sparks. As it turns out, Sparks may indeed have been able to buy the Buffalo Bill vehicle, as will be shown in a moment. If a satisfactory deal had been made, the big Fielding bandchariot would have been the most elaborate wagon to ever appear in a Sparks parade. Given that it was approaching five decades of service, it would also have been in need of major maintenance.

The two cross cages in the Hall deal have not been identified. Several are illustrated in photography of the 1910s but little is known about any of them. On the other hand, the seal den that Sparks purchased was almost assuredly the drop frame, former tableau cage that W. H. B. Jones photographed in Hattiesburg, Mississippi on September 15, 1919. Fig. 15 What has not been realized before is that the seal den in that image has already been rebuilt and that many of the carvings that were once applied to the removable sideboards have been discarded. The skyboard and other remaining scrolls are adequate, though, to confirm the origin of the wagon as one of the tableau cages of the Forepaugh-Sells show in the era of 1902-1906. Further, it is the upper corner of this wagon that appears over the top of the right shoulder of the clown in Figure 10 of this article. The existence of the wagon in its original Forepaugh-Sells configuration suggests that it was



**Fig. 17** The asymmetrical design, lions, cupids, shells and outside sunburst wheels all mark this vehicle as the lead bandwagon made by Bode for 1916. Eddie Jackson photo.

acquired by Sparks shortly after the end of the 1911 Forepaugh-Sells outfit. A late 1913 purchase from Hall would be appropriate to that end.

Wagon builder George Schmidt of Cincinnati, Ohio fabricated several groups of cages for Forepaugh-Sells. One set of 16-foot dens was furnished for 1902. They were rather elaborate, some with corner images. Another group was comprised of lesser tableau cages and may have



**Fig. 18** The 1916 Bode-built ticket wagon was originally white or yellow with dark lettering and stenciling, but in later years it was red and sported detailing worthy of an 1890s Pullman sleeper. Albert Conover collection.

encompassed all of the Forepaugh-Sells dens numbered between 46 and 52, inclusive, including the subject vehicle. Photographs document the existence of the tableau cage on Forepaugh-Sells sometime between 1905 and 1906 (panorama photo series) and at Peru, Indiana on June 13, 1906 (George Graf photo). The drop bottom, housing the seal tank,



is readily seen in the former view. Fig. 16 When the 1907 Forepaugh-Sells equipment was divided at the end of the 1907 tour, this cage was probably on the cut that was routed to Baraboo.

After two years of storage, the tableau cage was selected for use on the revived 1910-1911 Forepaugh-Sells show, as confirmed by a photo taken by Ben Kubly at Monroe, Wisconsin on August 30, 1911. Collaborative work by Stuart Thayer and the author has narrowed the pre-1907 Forepaugh-Sells number of this cage to either #50 or #52. The number applied on the 1910-1911 operation was either #22 or #26. Though it was placed on the surplus sale list that was issued when the two-year old operation was shelved, Sparks did not buy the wagon directly. The 1910-1911 Forepaugh-Sells cages were sold to Al G. Barnes, Downie & Wheeler, John H. Garrett and Charles Hall, with others held for use on Ringling Bros. Another four of them were peddled for \$800 on December 2, 1912 to Fred Buchanan, for placement on his Yankee Robinson circus. For reasons unknown, but perhaps for monies due or as part of an animal trade, William P. Hall received the former Forepaugh-Sells tableau cage from Buchanan. Those are the circumstances by which it came to be inspected by Charlie Sparks during his visit to Lancaster in late 1913.

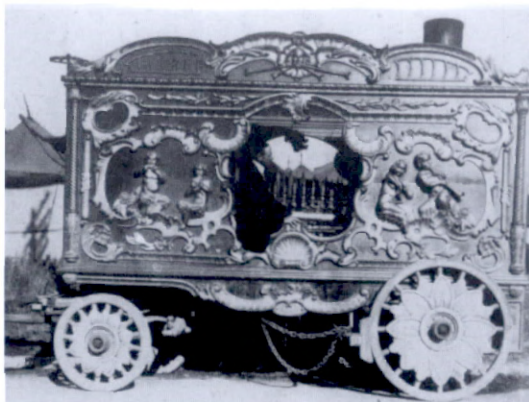
There were several transactions between Hall and the Ringlings in the aftermath of their shut down of Forepaugh-Sells. The surviving documentation provides no reference to Hall's purchase of the ex-Forepaugh/Buffalo Bill Fielding bandchariot from Forepaugh-Sells. Actually, there is no indication that the wagon was sold to anyone. Yet, it was presumably sold directly to Hall or involved in a Ringling deal for horses or elephants. The transfer from Baraboo to Lancaster would explain the appearance of the Buffalo Bill bandwagon at Hall's place when Sparks visited in late 1913. It also provides the route by which it went to Fred Buchanan, since it is known to have gone out on his Yankee Robinson show in 1914.

The Sparks seal den was presum-



**Fig. 19** The skyboard from this 1916 Bode-built cage was re-mounted on the ex-1902 Sells & Downs steam calliope in the late 1920s. Similar decorations were on other Bode-built cages. Author's collection.

ably wrecked, dismantled, sold off or rebuilt some time after 1919, as it disappears from the Sparks operation by the early 1920s. A photo cap-



**Fig. 20** The limited size openings provided by Bode in the sides of the 1916 Sparks steam calliope made it a very hot vehicle for the player. Joseph T. Bradbury collection.

tion in one of Gordon Carver's Sparks history installments states that it was lost in a 1921 Sparks train wreck, but evidence of the mishap has not been located. A loss in 1920 is more likely as Sparks was exchanging information with the Moellers in early 1921 about a seal enclosure.<sup>31</sup> The disappointing purchases from Hall may have caused Sparks to avoid second hand stuff and to generally resume the acquisition of only new wagons. Sparks continued to deal with Hall for horses as late as 1923.

#### **The Bode Wagon Company Orders**

For 1916, the Bode Wagon Company of Cincinnati, Ohio furnished a ticket wagon, a bandwagon, at least one cage and a steam calliope to the Sparks show. Chang Reynolds' notes state that Bode also furnished a number of baggage wagons to Sparks, but no reference

for the claim was cited and we have been unable to substantiate the statement.<sup>32</sup>

Bode later supplied three sixteen-foot long cages to Sparks in 1923. Each cage included "images" on the corners, among the last created to decorate a circus wagon. The word "image" was used by Frank A. Robbins and George Christy. "Carved figures on corners [sides]" is how the decorative detail was identified in a circa 1897 inventory of the Forepaugh-Sells cages. There was no uniformity of vocabulary on the circus ground.

Despite the lack of the actual contract, there is considerable evidence to confirm 1916 as the year when Bode furnished these replacement vehicles to the Sparks outfit. The new bandwagon is mentioned in the April 10, 1916 Salisbury (NC) *Evening Post*. The ticket wagon and bandwagon first appear in a set of Sparks photographs taken by Frank Farrell at Ithaca, New York on May 24, 1916. The bandwagon and the steam calliope also appear in other photographs dated 1916. The Salisbury (NC) *Evening Post* of April 8, 1916 mentioned the new bandwagon and the new \$2,200, 32-whistle steam calliope. The replacement device was also mentioned in the trade press, specifically *Billboard*, May 6, 1916 (page 22). The cage wagon was fitted with the same design outside sunburst wheels that were fitted to the calliope. Considered together, in conjunction with the absence of conflicting data, the references substantiate the stated 1916 Bode delivery date.

The bandwagon became the new lead bandwagon of the Sparks Circus



parades in 1916. Fig. 17 The central feature was a pair of "dancing" girls. Perhaps they were intended to represent Irish lassies, with gilded tresses in lieu of red. An unusual design was incorporated into the skyboards, which had the appearance of having been arranged to make use of some miscellaneous carvings that had served no other purpose. The asymmetrical combination of such elements was something of a Bode characteristic. It was assigned the identifying number 25 on the show.<sup>33</sup>

One of the carved lions applied to the bandwagon, either the left front or right rear figure, was salvaged many years later and is in the collections of the John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, Sarasota, Florida. It measures six inches deep, testimony to the heavy relief of the carving work. The figure stands 30.5 inches tall, which when scaled in a photograph yields a wagon height of twelve feet to the top and a length of 14.75 feet. Obviously, Sparks had wagons designed so that four would load onto a sixty-foot wooden flat car. The artifact has a sequence of decorative application as follows, from the wood surface outwards: dark green; lime green; gold leaf; white; dark green. The first three layers likely represent the original Bode decorative scheme preparation and surface. The last two were probably show-applied colors from about 1930, when the lions appear in a very dark color in an Eddie Jackson photograph.

The ticket wagon was a relatively short and stubby vehicle, fourteen feet long, with painted ornamentation and Bode's characteristic wheel decoration, a carved panel affixed to the outside surface of the spokes. Fig. 18 Despite the show's prosperity, the diminutive vehicle was presumably adequate for the job as it remained in service through the final 1931 tour. Unlike many other ticket wagons that had three sales windows, it had but a single rear ticket window, along with a side door for personnel access to the front office area. Akin to other Bode-built ticket wagons that dated back to 1905, it had wooden skirts that concealed the majority of the rear wheels. Skirts were seldom found on any wagons



**Fig. 21** After the Indian and soldier corner images were removed from #10 cage a drop with the letter "S" for Sparks was applied. Joe Meinardi photo, 1925.

other than two Bode-built 1903 Ringling tableaus and the several ticket wagons that were fabricated in the same shop. Those on the ticket wagons kept people from reaching under the wagon by the ticket window, and also placed a barrier between the muddy undercarriage and patrons standing in line. The Sparks vehicle bore the number 15 in 1931.

The Bode cage housed lions for the steel arena act. Fig. 19 The outside sunburst wheels on it matched those on the steam calliope, testimony to a common origin. Relatively elaborate carvings framed the sides and the top of the barred openings. An arched skyboard completed the decorative elements. For reasons unknown, perhaps because it didn't match others being procured, this cage was one of those sold to Andrew Downie before the 1922 season. The wagon served on Downie's Walter L. Main Circus, which became the basis of the Miller Bros. 101 Ranch Wild West in 1925. Though that show never carried a circus-style menagerie, the skyboards from the cage survived in the Millers' possession. Bill Hames, a Texas carnival owner, later bought some of the Miller wagons. One of them, a steam calliope that had been built by Bode in 1902 for the Sells & Downs circus, was eventually fitted

with the skyboards from this Sparks cage. They survived with the wagon and can be seen on the vehicle at Circus World Museum.

A photograph of the original watercolor artwork for the steam calliope survives in the Bode Wagon Company papers.<sup>34</sup> It was adorned in typical Bode calliope style, with cavorting cupid figures merrily playing trumpets.

Fig. 20 The fifteen-foot long wagon housed a 32-whistle instrument furnished by the Thomas J. Nichol Company of Cincinnati, Ohio. Ernest H. "Deacon" Albright (1879-1949) played the calliope during its first year of existence.

He complained in a May 16, 1939 letter to friend Alexander P. Clark that it was the hottest calliope that he ever played, the small openings on the sides causing much of the boiler heat loss to be retained inside the wagon, making it very uncomfortable. Albright was also offended by Sparks' old boss hostler, who seldom spotted the calliope near a fire plug where its supply of water could be replenished. It's likely that Albright was expected to offer a tip to someone for closer placement. He resented the action, but not to the point that he complained to Charlie Sparks about it. He simply blew the show in September 1916.<sup>35</sup> For some parades the calliope was drawn by a team of horses, but in other instances one of the show's Mack trucks, with a

**Fig. 22** The most aesthetically pleasing of the 1923 Bode cages was the #12 lion den, which featured well carved lion sculptures on the four corners. Joseph T. Bradbury collection.







**Fig. 23** Bengal tigers were once contained in Bode cage #14 of 1923. The corner images were representations of the Biblical figures Joseph and Mary. J. V. Leonard photo, 1926.

big water tank on the back, did the honors.

Despite Fletcher Smith and Les Bartlett being on the show, Charlie Sparks sought the best steam calliope player available. Harry Wills (1872-1949) was as professional a calliapist to ever preside at the keyboard, having been dubbed "Supreme Master of the Calliope" by James A. Bailey. He replaced Albright in the fall of 1916 and remained the Sparks player through 1928, perhaps the longest such tenure in circus history. In line with the care that had been exercised by some of his predecessors for other instruments, Wills provided meticulous maintenance of his charge. He compelled his fireman to "blow down," to drain the calliope boiler every day to ensure the best operation possible in the days before the common application of water quality treatment additives. Photographs reveal that Wills had some kind of inclined rod apparatus affixed to the whistles. They may have served as a guide for tuning or to reinforce the whistle center stems against sway and breakage in transit. The wagon bore the number 50 on Sparks.

The bandwagon and ticket wagon served with the circus though the final season of 1931. The bandwagon was exhibited for a short period at Ringling-Barnum's Sarasota, Florida winter quarters, and was then destroyed. The destruction may have been part of a federal income tax settlement with the administrator of the John Ringling estate. Four of the wagon carvings, comprising two of the "dancing girls," one of the lions

and a cupid figure playing pan pipes were documented in renderings accomplished for the *Index of American Design*, the WPA "make work" project for artists in the 1930s.<sup>36</sup> Though the late Maurice Allaire believed that the dancing girls were in a federal government collection (probably thinking that their

illustrations in the design index confirmed ownership), there is no evidence that they survived outdoor storage and exhibition in Florida weather.

The Sparks Circus of 1931 was a reduced scope operation of only 15 cars. Deleted from the lineup of equipment was the steam calliope. Ira Watts, who managed the 1930 Sparks show, distinctly remembered shipping it from the show's Macon, Georgia quarters to Ringling-Barnum's Sarasota location.<sup>37</sup> Calliope authority and collector



**Fig. 24** One of the few second-hand vehicles purchased by Sparks was this tableau, which served as the clown bandwagon and reserved seat ticket wagon starting in 1918. Photo by W. H. B. Jones, 1919.

Alexander P. Clark went looking for a calliope in the 1930s and he inquired about the Sparks machine. On May 22, 1939, Sam Gumpertz responded to his query, stating that there were no steam calliopes in Sarasota, but that there might be one in Macon, Georgia. A year later, Charlie Sparks responded through an intermediary that his steamer had been sold, but no further details were provided. Unfortunately, the Bode wagon was destroyed in one of the periodic

clean-up efforts at Sarasota sometime between 1930 and 1939. The whistles inside it were salvaged and preserved in the Sarasota winter quarters. In a May 1960 conversation with Joseph T. Bradbury, Lloyd Morgan, Sr. stated that there were two sets of steam calliope whistles squirreled away in the loft of the menagerie building at the Sarasota winter quarters.

Rationally analyzed, one set would have been from the 1916 Sparks calliope and the other from the 1913 Nichol instrument installed in the 1902 Ringling Bros. steamer. One set of whistles is "lost," in the sense that they cannot be traced. The other set, or perhaps a merged set of the two, still survives. One of the whistles reportedly became the one attached to the quarters cookhouse boiler, and was reportedly salvaged by Ringling Museum curator Mel Miller.<sup>38</sup> The remaining 30 or 31 whistles from the set were reportedly "liberated" out of the winter quarters by George

Werner (1899?-1964), a former Ringling-Barnum boss canvasser who was collecting circus archival and artifact material for a museum at his home in Millstadt, Illinois. Werner never used the whistles, but traded them to calliope aficionado Harry Shell of Farmington, Missouri. Shell eventually sold them to the Peru Circus City Festival, where an attempt was made to make a functional calliope out of them. The work, for a variety of reasons, came to naught. They came to life again in the early 1980s, when a youthful and dedicated Dave Morecraft succeeded in creating a workable calliope from the parts. First hauled on a straight bed truck and powered by a portable air compressor, the whistles later came under steam power. The instrument, with its Sparks or Ringling Bros. or mixed circus whistles, has subsequently appeared in other Peru marches, usually under the careful guidance of Morecraft. Most recently it has been exhibited in the lobby and museum area of the Circus City Festival building.

Three sixteen-foot long cages were made by Bode for Sparks in 1923.



Why the order was tendered to Bode after the Moellers had provided several cages in each of the two prior years is unknown. Perhaps there was an unknown deficiency in the Moeller products, which would be hard to believe given their decades of similar work. It might be a matter that the Moeller shop was again filled by other obligations or perhaps Bode decided to take in one final circus order before closing that chapter in his life. A lower price than the Moellers provided could also have secured the order.

Each den was fitted with corner niches that could be filled with carved images.<sup>39</sup> The cages included: number 10, which may have origina-



**Fig. 25** The first five wagons fabricated by the Moellers for Sparks in 1921 were lined up along the north side of Third Avenue for this photo taken shortly before they were shipped. Moeller Papers, CWM.

ly had what appear to be soldier and Indian images on the corners that were deleted by 1927 or 1928; number 12, which had carved lion heads on pedestals; and number 14, which featured religious figures, seemingly Mary and Joseph, the parents of Jesus. Figs. 21 to 23 The lion carvings for number 12 were actually residue from the Frank Spellman's 1917 U. S. Motorized Circus project that Bode partially completed in 1917. One of the lion carvings can be seen in a photograph of the Bode plant interior.<sup>40</sup> All of the cages served the show through 1931. A lion head was salvaged from cage 12 and mounted over the vestibule entry on one of the railroad cars that were placed on the grounds of the Sarasota winter quarters. There it was outfitted with a plaque painted with a "legend" that proclaimed it to be "Old Rufus," purportedly an 1885

carving by one Rufus Leatherberry and a past possession of P. T. Barnum. No one apparently questioned why such a valued artifact was mounted outdoors to deteriorate in the Florida weather.<sup>41</sup>

One of the male and one of the female images from cage 12 were salvaged from Sarasota by parties unknown and acquired by Terrell Jacobs. He had them placed on either side of a small tableau wagon that he had constructed. The images eventually became the property of Lee Allen Estes of Lexington, Kentucky. A photograph published in 1959 shows Estes holding the male figure, but exactly how the various transfers in ownership were made has

never been satisfactorily explained. Estes advised that when he found the figure it was covered with two inches of dirt.<sup>42</sup> Others have placed a fourth sixteen-foot cage on Sparks in the 1920s, crediting it to Moeller or Bode. The author believes that this is an error. It is our opinion that the so-called fourth cage is actually number 10, after removal of the corner images and application of a Moeller like carved letter "S" on the mud board. There is no unaccounted for cage in Bode or Moeller documentation, nor is there reference to a sixteen foot Moeller cage anywhere. Regardless of the builder, the effects of animal urine and feces, weather and general wear and tear caused all of the dens to be rebuilt by Sparks workmen or others in the mid to late 1920s, resulting in changes to the physical appearance of all of them.

In addition to the wagons that were built specifically for Sparks, the show acquired another fine Bode



**Fig. 26** The big top center pole wagon that the Moellers built for Sparks in 1921 looked like some similar vehicles that they had fabricated for Baraboo shows. Photograph by J. V. Leonard, 1926.

tableau wagon that had been made for others. Fig. 24 This unusually decorated vehicle, which had carvings inspired by horse-drawn hearse ornamentation, may have been built for the 1905 Sautelle-Welsh circus. For certain it was with the 1906 Col. Fred Cummins Wild West and then became part of the 1907 to 1909 Cole Bros. World Toured Circus operated by Canadian showman Martin Downs (1865-1909). Following Downs' death, the show chattel was auctioned and this tableau was purchased by J. Augustus Jones. A 1915 image recording the vehicle on Jones is in the Howard C. Tibbals collection, with a 1916 view printed years later in *Billboard* (October 12, 1940 issue). He owned it through 1917 and then sold it to Sparks before the 1918 tour. While on Sparks, the wagon was altered into the grandstand ticket office by the

**Fig. 27** Work was underway on an air calliope and cages for the 1921 Sparks Circus in this view of the Moeller Brothers shop on Third Avenue in Baraboo. Moeller Papers, CWM.

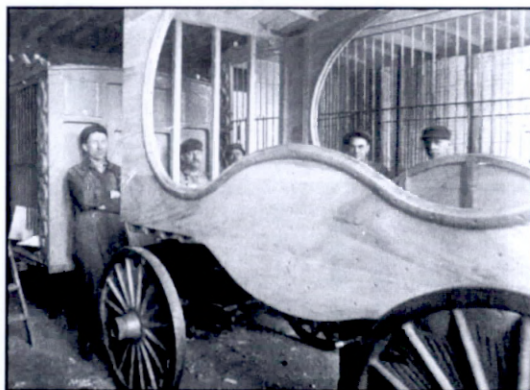






Fig. 28 The Moeller-built air calliope design maximized visibility, ventilation and propagation of the music from the Pneumatic calliope that it housed. Pfening Archives.

placement of a ticket counter inside the rear doors. It also served as the sideshow bandwagon in parades. Early in its Sparks tenure, carvings that had been on the 1910 Sullivan & Eagle steam calliope were added to the sides. The wagon served the Sparks circus through the final 1931 tour. It bore the number 56.<sup>43</sup>

#### The Moeller Brothers Orders

Charlie Sparks confirmed in a letter written afterwards that Henry Moeller, Jr., had visited the Sparks Circus when it played Portage, Wisconsin on July 23, 1920. How their meeting came to pass has not been determined. Legend has it that Moeller and his brother, Corwin, manufactured new wagons for Charlie Sparks only after the personal intervention of their cousin, Charles Ringling. It could be true, as the Moellers had generally abandoned circus wagon work by the 1920s and it required additional effort to return to what had once been a major activity of their shop. The Portage visitation marked the commencement of another satisfactory Sparks business relationship that spanned from 1920 until 1926.

The Moeller output for Sparks included: four cages (\$3,900), an air calliope (\$586.68) and a pole wagon (\$796) for 1921 (along with a tank and fish box for the seal den and an extra pole, for an additional \$54.22); three cages and a tableau (which is sometimes mistakenly identified as a cage, even in the Moeller papers, for

\$3,450) for 1922; a tableau wagon and two baggage wagons (\$3,219) for 1924; and an electric light wagon, a jack wagon and two heavy drop frame baggage wagons, one sixteen and the other eighteen feet long (\$4,584.17), for 1926.<sup>44</sup>

Fortunately, Henry Moeller, Jr. preserved many papers and documents relating to his circus work. In addition to ledgers, photographs, correspondence, invoices and other related data, the Moeller collection includes the drawings for the Sparks 1924 tableau wagon and the 1925-built generator, jack and heavy drop frame baggage wagons. The materials may be the most comprehensive in existence for any series of wooden wagons ever constructed for the



Fig. 29 Cage number 14 was one of the three that were furnished to Sparks by Moeller in 1922. It's shown here on Third Avenue in Baraboo, before shipment. Moeller Papers, CWM.

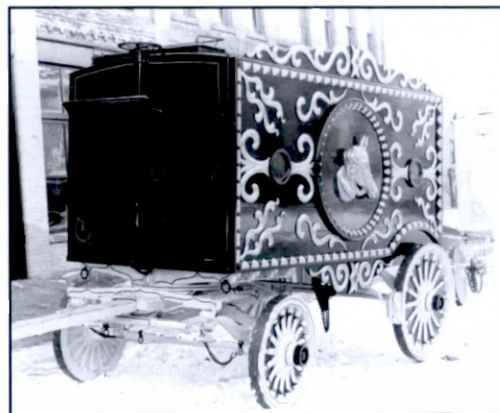
American circus business. The Milwaukee Ornamental Carving Company (hereafter MOCC) furnished all of the carvings for previous Moeller commissions. Unfortunately, that is the one aspect of the Sparks wagons that is not covered in the preserved papers. There is no record as to the source of the decorative elements placed on the Sparks wagons. The MOCC had shifted towards decorative plaster work and away from wood carving by the 1920s, but could have made the necessary pieces to special order.<sup>45</sup> The Sparks

cages were similar to others that Moeller made for the Al G. Barnes circus by 1920, the last of a line that stretched back to the Ringling tableau cages of 1893. The first four supplied to Sparks, constructed for 1921, were similar except that the corner posts of just one of them had a carved letter "S," for Sparks, in the center. Fig. 25 All of the technical details of the cages were spelled out in a letter that Henry Moeller sent to Sparks dated November 30, 1920. Nominally, the bodies were planned for twelve feet long, 5'-6" wide and 5'-4" high. Five would provide a tightly packed load for a 60-foot flat car. They were to be fitted with carved "tops" and "drops," as Moeller specifically identified them. Contemporary enthusiasts have termed them "sky boards" and "mud boards."

The front wheels were three feet high (Moeller and others didn't say "diameter"), with a three-inch wide tire, the same width on the three-and-a-half foot rear wheels. The placement of this Moeller order caused Sparks to announce that he had sold all of his cross cages, an indication of the higher status conveyed by full size cages. Henceforth, all Sparks dens would also be pulled by four-horse teams, suggesting that the cross cages had been assigned two-horse hitch, and in at least one case, two camels.<sup>46</sup>

The 28-foot long pole wagon that

Fig. 30 The sill carving on the Moeller-built tableau of 1921 followed the contour of the rear wheel, a detail seen on few wagons. Pfening Archives.





was part of the 1921 Moeller order was of the type that carried the center poles in forged steel cradles affixed to the outside surface of the side stakes.

Fig. 26 It had Sarven wheels of three and four-foot height with five-inch tires.

Moeller made a sketch of the racks so that they could be fabricated accurately. There is no knowledge of any earlier design sketches done at the Moeller firm and none exist from before the Sparks order. The technique may well reflect an advance implemented by Moeller as he modernized his nineteenth-century blacksmith firm to meet 20<sup>th</sup> century needs. Sparks assigned the number 6 to the wagon, as per a 1926 photo of it.

The air calliope was an add-on to the 1921 order, with Sparks giving it the written green light on December 7, 1920. Fig. 27 He wanted the calliope built light, about ten feet long, suitable for six ponies to pull, and to cost about \$300. It ended up costing double that, but Sparks didn't complain. He sent along a draft for \$5,000 to cover the entire order. If that's how Sparks paid suppliers, it can be well understood why he was so well liked in the business. Prepayment for work was almost unheard of in the circus world. Vendors often had to wait for payment until after the show went on tour, and then they'd have to check the route to determine where to visit the show and personally lodge their payment request.

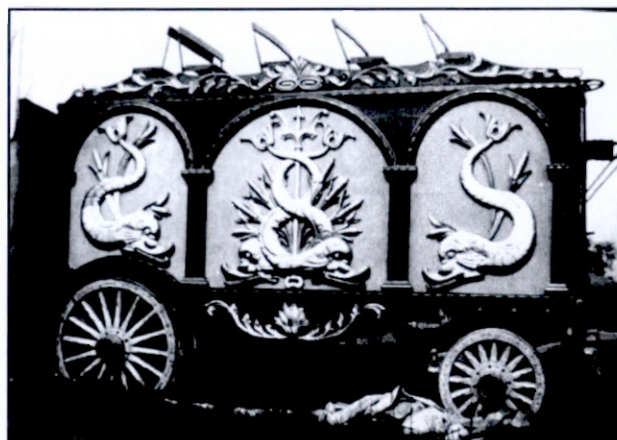
In the next two weeks, Sparks visited Hagenbeck-Wallace winter quarters at West Baden, Indiana and measured the Bode-built air calliope there. On December 28, 1920, he wrote the Moellers, giving them the dimensions of that wagon and also noting that there was a roof hatch that opened to facilitate installation of the tallest whistles. The Moellers improved on the Bode arrangement and provided an arched top in the Sparks calliope, eliminating the roof penetration and its attendant problems. The next letter from Sparks, dated January 12, 1921, accepted the higher cost for the calliope, acknowledged the superior roof arrangement and also mentioned a drawing for the

calliope wagon that no longer exists. In a very cordial manner, Sparks wrote "Thanking you for the interest you have taken in this matter and don't worry about the price of the Air Calliope build it nice and what ever the difference is let me know and I will send you [a] check." Charlie was obviously a nice guy with whom to do business. His genial manner likely led to optimum performance by reputable and responsible suppliers who sought to maintain this highly regarded circus man as a valued customer. Two more letters, dated January 24 and February 1, 1921, came from Sparks, both describing in detail the special arrangements that he wanted on the seal tank. The attention to those types of items by the show's owner strongly suggests his close management style and mastery of all vehicle design issues. He truly was a showman's showman.

The Moeller shop produced more air calliope wagons than any other firm. Fig. 28 The basic design consisted of an enclosed box body wagon with large side openings in the shape of a drooping oval loop. The calliope and player could readily be seen through the penetrations. They also served to allow the music to reach listeners ears and for the exhaust of the gasoline engine powering the calliope blower to be dissipated. The Moellers made their first air calliope for the Ringling Bros.' World's Greatest Shows in 1913. An entry in their ledger placed the cost at \$209.99.<sup>47</sup> A similar unit for Barnum & Bailey may also have come from their shop. They made the smaller one that the Gollmar Bros. America's Favorite Shows added in 1915. That one cost just \$200.<sup>48</sup> These were both more elaborate than the one fabricated for Sparks, which was nearly three times as costly and with less detail. If material and labor costs had not escalated significantly, it leads one to believe that the Moellers made a premium profit on

the Sparks orders. It may also have been more costly to make what were quickly becoming anachronistic conveyances, American transport having shifted rapidly to trucks following the sale of World War I surplus vehicles.

The exterior of the calliope was



**Fig. 31** The bandwagon supplied to Sparks in 1924 was a modified revival of the design that the firm had utilized in 1919 for a Dode Fisk circus vehicle. J. V. Leonard photo, 1926.

embellished with some simple carvings and a central oval featuring a painted countryside scene. A Pneumatic Calliope Company instrument with 43 whistles and a siren whistle was ordered by the show in adequate time to be operational at the season opener.<sup>49</sup> Sparks presumably ordered the gas engine to power the calliope blower himself and show mechanics assembled the apparatus inside the wagon. John H. Del Vecho (1863?-1946) played the Sparks air calliope longer than anyone else, covering the position from 1925 to 1929 and perhaps intermittently before then.

A photograph exists showing the Sparks air calliope, and the four cages, under construction inside the Moeller shop on Third Avenue in Baraboo in early 1921. Other photographs were taken following their completion, with the vehicles lined up outside, across the street from Moeller's shop, in front of a Gollmar family-owned business. With the Ringling show gone from Baraboo, the scene was a bittersweet reminder of days when circus wagons frequently rumbled through the streets. The



air calliope was assigned Sparks #29. All of the Moeller wagons were on hand when the show opened its 1921 tour.<sup>50</sup>

The three cages fabricated in 1922 were assigned the numbers 12, 14 and 16 before leaving Baraboo. Cages 12 and 14 had the carved "S" letters on the corner posts. Two letter "S" carvings were placed on the tops and drops of number 16. In his Sparks articles, the late Gordon Carver speculated that the cage bodies were painted as follows: 12 was green; 14 was white; and 16 was yellow. There's no documentation in the Moeller papers defining those choices and we surmise that Carver deduced them from the surviving black and white photography, perhaps in conjunction with parade order data. These three cages were also photographed on Third Avenue in Baraboo, prior to their shipment to the Sparks organization. Fig. 29 Event-ually the Sparks assigned numbers on Moeller-built cages 12 and 14 would be changed, both numbers being reassigned in 1923 to new Bode-built cages. Moeller cages later bore the numbers 24 (1921 built), 30, 37 (either 12 or 14 of 1922) and 38 on Sparks. All of the corner post carvings were removed during show rebuilding by about 1928. Sparks had twelve cages on his show that measured twelve-feet long, but the source of the five not covered in the Moeller records is unknown.

The 1922 tableau supplied by Moeller featured a bas relief carving of a horse's head and a bust of a woman on the side. Fig. 30 It was akin to something one might see on a circus poster or program cover of the era, an equestrienne and her favorite horse posed together. The wagon was number 18 on Sparks. It was fourteen feet long and served as the candy stand wagon. The delivery of the wagon rendered another tableau, the 1913 Witt-built ticket wagon, as surplus. It was sold off to Floyd King, an action that resulted in it being the only Sparks wagon in existence today. The Moeller tableau remained with the show through 1931.

Correspondence in the Moeller papers confirms that all of the wheels, axles, springs, shackles and fifth wheels ("platform circles" was Henry Moeller's term) for the first Sparks order was fulfilled by Suelflohn & Seefeld Company of Milwaukee. Apparently there was a



**Fig. 32** The Moellers constructed a heavy duty wagon to haul the show's electrical generation apparatus. Henry Moeller sketched out the wagon before construction commenced. Pfening Archives.

problem with the panel work furnished. The 1922 wagon components were supplied by the St. Marys Wheel & Spoke Company of St. Marys, Ohio, as were those for the 1924 commission.

The 1924 tableau, given the nickname "dolphin" by some enthusiasts, carried the number 40. The design was committed to paper before the shop work commenced and that drawing survives today in the Moeller papers. Whether Henry Moeller or an artist sketched it is unknown, but more than likely Henry did the drawing himself. It revealed some skill with a pencil.<sup>51</sup> The new wagon became the show's number two bandwagon. On January 1, 1924 Sparks wrote the Moellers advising "if possible put five seats on the tableau that you are building. If you can't get five seats on, make four. We must have four seats." Charlie Sparks knew what he wanted. The Moellers were able to install five seats, and also put backrests on them to the ever lasting appreciation of the bandsmen who rode the wagon. Sparks advised in a

November 5, 1923 letter to Moeller that he needed space in the wagon and wanted it made with a drop bottom. It is thought that the wagon hauled wardrobe and the added depth was useful in that regard. Conversely, he didn't want it made over sixteen feet long, suggesting that there was a loading limitation on the train. The bandwagon served with the show through the final 1931 tour. Fig. 31 Two drop bottom baggage wagons were also being fabricated at the time, one to be sixteen feet long and the other eighteen feet. It may have been the last big tableau with wooden carvings and rolling on wagon wheels built entirely new for an American circus.<sup>52</sup>

The last four wagons that the Moellers made for Sparks were fabricated during the winter of 1925-1926. Sketches were prepared for the 14-foot long jack wagon and the eighteen-foot long electric light plant wagon. Fig. 32 The sketch made for the heavy baggage wagons of 1923 was likely re-used to build two more such wagons. All of these wagons were ruggedly built, with screw brakes, Sarven wheels and other features that gave them extra durability. Among the Sparks wagons that fit the heavy drop wagon description were the number 4 cookhouse wagon and the number 36 property wagon of 1926. Fig. 33

### Epilog

With the completion of the Moeller wagons, Charlie Sparks concluded the assembly of the fleet of wagons that would serve through the final 1931 season of his circus. Although it was a very well-designed and constructed property, the aggregate impact of the sale of the circus to others, the Depression, Florida weather and the settlement of the John Ringling estate assured that none of the Sparks Circus wagons ever served in show duty following the last tour. In a poignant way, they were the best, but they had no place in the Sparks Circus wagons ever served in





**Fig. 33** The sidewall construction of the baggage wagons furnished by Moeller to Sparks looked the same as on Ringling and later on Forepaugh-Sells wagons. J. V. Leonard photo, 1926.

show duty following the last tour. In a poignant way, they were the best, but they had no place to go and no one needed them; their day had passed. Nearly eight decades later, one rebuilt wagon, several carvings, contract papers and sketches and dozens of photographs remain to document the proud wagon and parade heritage of the Sparks Circus. Fig. 34

A century had passed since the first circus wagons were constructed to haul J. Purdy Brown's pavilion in 1825 until the last Sparks order was executed by the Moeller Brothers. A few thousand vehicles were built in the interim. Between the 1880s and early 1900s, circus wagons advanced from lighter-duty, carriage-derived, dray vehicles traversing rudimentary overland routes to husky, heavy-duty, spring platform or dead axle conveyances that navigated paved streets and rode on railroad flat cars. Wooden-bodied wagons continued to be repaired and upgraded until the end of the railroad tent circus era in 1956. The use of vehicles rolling on pneumatic or solid rubber tires commenced in the 1920s and proliferated in the 1930s, with structural and sheet steel largely replacing organic materials in the body construction. That type of construction, embracing technology and hardware employed in the fabrication of commercial-duty trailers and vans for street and highway opera-

tions would be employed in the manufacture of railroad circus vehicles in the three decades following the Sparks order. The present era commenced in 1960, with Ringling-Barnum's revival of the old tunnel car show operation. Their engineers blended metal bodies and pneumatic tires with a revival of Spalding & Rogers "small wheels" of the 1850s, thereby initiating the current basis for contemporary railroad circus vehicle design.

#### Acknowledgments

In 1943, circus man Eddie Jackson (1875?-1965) wrote to Charles Sparks on behalf of Sparks Circus aficionado Maurice Allaire concerning the show's wagons. Though it was fifteen years since he had owned the property, Sparks carefully typed out a complete list of show vehicles. It included not only the name and purpose of the wagon, but its length, width, height and other details of interest. In sending it on to Jackson, Sparks wrote "this was made out from memory, but I will gamble it's correct." Jackson, in turn, sent it on to Allaire with this endorsement: "NO MAN IN THE WORLD ever had a better memory than Charley Sparks and I'll guarantee you that it is correct." We have benefited from the access to this document, which was made available by Thelma Allaire from her late husband's collection. The author is grateful to the following people who contributed to this article: Paul Bernhardt, the late Jim Caldwell, Steve Flint, Bob Sabia, Myron E. Vickers, Robert and Brian R. Heber, Fred D. Pfening, Jr., Fred D. Pfening III, John F. Polacsek and Richard J. Reynolds III.

#### Notes

1. Salisbury (NC) *Evening Post*, April 8 and 10, 1916.
2. *Bandwagon*, V, 6, page 14.

3. The Witt firm is profiled in the author's article in *Bandwagon*, XLV, 6, pages 4-11.

4. Tibbals collection and *Bandwagon* cover, VIII, 6.

5. *Billboard*, December 14, 1912, page 100.

6. Photos, Circus World Museum (hereafter CWM), Digital Library of Georgia.

7. Photographs in John F. Polacsek collection; transaction noted in *Billboard*, April 12, 1913, page 39.

8. *Billboard*, March 14, 1914, page 24 and January 31, 1914, page 40.

9. See *Bandwagon*, XLVI, 3, page 6. The Heber collection is now at CWM.

10. *Billboard*, May 22, 1915, page 63 confirms the transfer from Sparks to Heber Bros.; personal communication from Robert Heber, February 25, 2000.

11. Letter in Heber collection, CWM. Eschman's ad in *Billboard*, January 12, 1918, page 31, specified two Band Tableaus and one Ticket and Bandwagon, none of which appears to identify a band-chariot specifically.

12. *Billboard*, March 19, 1910, page 55; August 25, 1934, page 37.

13. Photograph in Al S. Pitcaithley scrapbook, CWM.

14. *Billboard*, December 12, 1914, page 43.

15. *Billboard*, April 17, 1915, page 10; Salisbury (NC) *Evening Post*, April 12, 1915.

16. Charlotte (NC) *Daily Observer*, December 26, 1911. The Salisbury papers of the time were destroyed in a 1912 fire. Smith's story is in *Billboard*, August 25, 1934, page 37.

17. Letter from Paul Bernhardt to the author dated November 15, 2001.

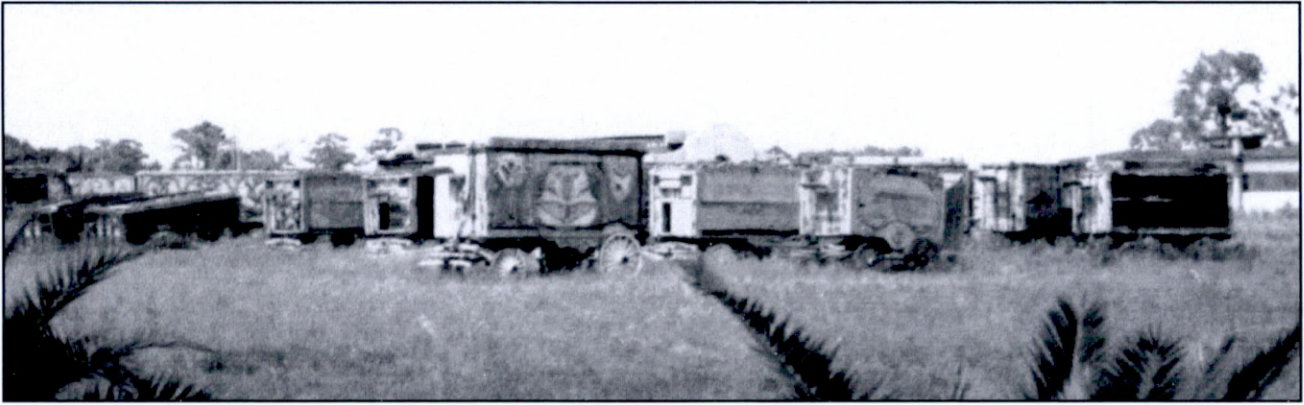
18. Salisbury (NC) *Evening Post*, April 8, 1916 and April 11, 1917. There are several erroneous reports of two steam calliopes in the Sparks parade, such as the one in the April 1, 1919 Salisbury (NC) *Evening Post*. That note may also be in error concerning the number of calliopes. Also see *Billboard*, March 11, 1916, page 57 and April 21, 1917, page 25.

19. Print from Richard and Albert Conover Collection, CWM.

20. *Billboard*, April 16, 1910, page 19. Two of the photographs taken then were printed as plates 1303 and 1305 in the May 1910 issue of *Carriage Monthly*.

21. After service on Miller Bros. 101 Ranch, the big Norris & Rowe tableau with griffins was split in half, with the two carved sides being altered into a double-deck carnival show front. See *Billboard*, July 4, 1914, page 19, for a photograph of it in service on the C. A. Wortham "Hippodrome" show. The front later served on Snapp Bros. railroad carnival, sometime 1921-1930, the Snapps





**Fig. 34** The Sparks wagons were near the end of their existence after they were parked in the bone yard of the Ringling-Barnum quarters in Sarasota, Florida. C. P. Fox photo, 1938.

being Wortham's brothers-in-law.

22. *Billboard*, February 7, 1920, page 89 and February 21, 1920, page 58; *Bandwagon*, V, 3, page 5.

23. *Billboard*, February 21, 1920, page 58.

24. *Billboard*, January 11, 1913, page 22; *Clipper*, February 15, 1913, page 19.

25. A photo of the Kilian bandwagon is in *Bandwagon*, II, 2, page 3.

26. The purchase by Floyd King is covered in an interview conducted with him by Bob Brisendine on December 5, 1964, a transcript of which is in the Thomas P. Parkinson papers, CWM. During the interview, King stated that the ticket wagon was made in Morristown, Tennessee, a significant statement that was not appreciated until more than four decades later. The subsequent history of the wagon is covered by Joseph T. Bradbury in *Bandwagon*, V, 1, pages 10-11, and Robert Senhauser's "Circus Wagons" in *White Tops*, XXVII, 2, pages 13-14.

27. Photo, CWM. Bradbury's history of the wagon is in *Bandwagon*, VI, 5, pages 14-15.

28. Letter from William H. Woodcock to Richard E. Conover dated November 11, 1963. Bradbury's history of this tableau is in *Bandwagon*, VI, 5, pages 14-15. Photographs are at CWM.

29. *Billboard*, January 31, 1914, page 24.

30. Letter dated October 22, 1912, William P. Hall papers, CWM.

31. *Bandwagon*, XXII, 1, page 15.

32. See the author's "Bode Wagon Company," *Bandwagon*, XXVI, 6, pages 5-11.

33. Joe Bradbury's history of the wagon is in *Bandwagon*, V, 1, pages 9-10.

34. The Bode Wagon Company papers at CWM were the gift of the builder's grandson, Albert Bode III.

35. The Sparks boss hostler was James

"Jim" Jacobs (1849?-1917), who was assisted by his son, Chancey. His brother Tom was the Sparks trainmaster. Jacobs had been with Sparks as early as 1910. He had the same position on the S. H. Barrett show in the 1880s and was characterized as a "showman of the old school." He was said to be indefatigable in working for his employers interests and died of a heart attack on the lot. Albright would likely have lost in a confrontation with Jacobs and Sparks. See *Billboard*, May 5, 1917, page 75 for Jacobs obituary.

36. The original renderings are at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D. C. They are reproduced in Clarence P. Hornung, *Treasury of American Design*, (1950), II, plates 2145, 2146, 2153 and 2154.

37. Letter from Joseph T. Bradbury to Tom Parkinson dated April 14, 1954, CWM; also see *Bandwagon*, XXVIII, 5, page 25.

38. *Bandwagon*, XXVIII, 5, page 20.

39. *Billboard*, January 13, 1923, page 103; March 10, 1923, page 74.

40. *Bandwagon*, XXVI, 6, page 6, the original print of which is now at CWM.

41. Photograph, Howard C. Tibbals collection.

42. Louisville (KY) *Courier-Journal Magazine*, June 21, 1959, page 5; letter from Lee Allen Estes to C. P. Fox dated April 18, 1960, CWM. The two carvings are now preserved at CWM.

43. Joe Bradbury's history of the wagon is in *Bandwagon*, VI, 2, pages 10-11. A photograph of the wagon taken for the *Index of American Design* is in Hornung,

II, plate 2150.

22, 1921 and a statement prepared for a 1931 tax review for Charles Sparks, Moeller papers, CWM. It should be noted that Henry Moeller, Jr. erred and placed the order for 1922 for three cages and a tableau in the winter of 1920-1921 and not 1921-1922.

45. Coverage of the MOCC is in the author's paper in *Bandwagon*, XXVIII, 6, page 49.

46. *Billboard*, February 21, 1920, page 58.

47. Entry in Moeller 1913-1916 ledger, page 63, dated March 14, 1913, Moeller papers, CWM.

48. Moeller ledger, page 117, entry for March 15, 1915, Moeller papers, CWM.

49. *Billboard*, February 5, 1921, page 65.

50. *Billboard*, April 9, 1921, page 102.

51. The drawing is reproduced in C. P. Fox's book *Circus Parades*, (1953), page 57, and also in C. P. Fox and F. Beverly Kelley, *The Great Circus Street Parade in Pictures*, (1978), page 44. In both texts it is identified as having been created for the 1910 Forepaugh-Sells circus. Other than the verbal recall of Henry Moeller, Jr., who provided the identification for Fox, there is no evidence of the attribution. Given the abundance of Sparks documentation, including several sketches, it's more rational to assume that the tableau was not envisioned until late 1923. One has to be careful in analyzing various Moeller documents as comments were inserted many years after the fact in several notable instances. Moeller had a copy of Franz Sales Meyer's book, *Handbook of Ornament* (editions released in 1894, 1896, 1910 and 1924) and reportedly utilized the dolphin figure from page 86, plates 56-57, for the Sparks wagon.

52. Bradbury's history of the wagon is in *Bandwagon*, V, 1, pages 9-10. Two *Index of American Design* photos of the wagon are in Hornung, II, plates 2147 and 2148.



# "Honest" John Kelley VS: John Ringling

By John M. Kelley

## Preface

The document duplicated below is an affidavit made on May 30, 1934 by Attorney John M. Kelley (1873-1963). It is from the Tom Parkinson papers at the Robert L. Parkinson Library, Circus World Museum, Baraboo, Wisconsin.

From about 1906 onward Kelley had acted as lawyer for the Ringling circus partnership. He was privy to much confidential and privileged information gathered as attorney for the Ringlings both individually and as partners. For reasons shown below he was derisively called "Honest" John Kelley.

Kelley's affidavit is denominated "Exhibit D" and seems to have been attached to a pleading responding to a 1934 complaint by John Ringling.

John M. Kelley, Ringling attorney. All illustrations are from the Pfening Archives.



From all that appears, John Ringling's suit sought to undo and void agreements he made in July 1932 for restructuring his financial obligations and reorganizing the Ringling-Barnum Circus, among other things. As grounds for his complaint, he averred that at the time he made the deals he was ill, was not of sound and disposing mind and memory, was coerced and intimidated against his will, was surrounded by former friends who had turned against him, and was without benefit of independent counsel.

John Ringling never owned more than a third of the circus bearing his name. John was the last of the brothers who were partners. The others, listed according to the years of their deaths, were: Otto (1911), Al (1916), Henry – successor to Otto's share (1918), Alf T. (1919) and Charles (1926).

After the death of Henry in 1918, the circus partnership was represented by three equal shares held by Alf T., Charles, and John, respectively. Then, upon the deaths of Alf T. and Charles, their shares went to their heirs – Richard Ringling (son of Alf T.) and Edith Ringling (widow of Charles). In hindsight, John and his last two brothers should have made a formal partnership agreement providing that upon the death of one, the survivor(s) had the option to buy the share before it passed to the heirs.

But that was not done. After Charles's death in 1926, John projected himself to the outside world as the Ringling circus czar. In truth he was only a minority owner.

In early 1932, while dancing at the Gasparilla Ball in Tampa, someone stepped on John Ringling's foot, causing an injury. It lingered, got infected, and would not heal, suggesting a diabetic condition. Given his eating and other habits, that would not have been surprising. His condition worsened, complicated by a mild stroke. In June 1932 he took refuge for rest and recuperation in the new (1927) and lavish Half Moon Hotel on Coney Island. It was owned, at least in part, by Sam Gumpertz. He and John Ringling were long time friends, fellow entrepreneurs and impresarios. Like Ringling, Gumpertz was a fellow winter resident

John Ringling





of Sarasota.

In 1932 John Ringling was near financial ruin. He had defaulted on a personal note(s) held by a consortium of money lenders including Allied Owners and New York Investors. Leading figures with the money lenders, whose names appear in the affidavit, were William Greve, F. T. Pender, and the lawyer for the group, Alexander Siegel. Moreover, the circus was in terrible financial condition in that, the worst year of the Great Depression.

Unknown to Ringling, Sam Gumpertz was in league with the lenders. Edith Ringling resented the high handed and dismissive manner of her brother-in-law John. She wanted action taken to protect her circus interest which was equal to his. She brought along Aubrey Ringling (Richard's widow) who held the other third. Edith was the leader of the two, and Aubrey seems to have taken her cues from Edith.

Of course, the money lenders could have sought to attach the circus and liquidate its properties. But that was no solution. Little could be realized from selling all that paraphernalia under fire sale conditions. Other shows were hurting as well and many of them had already gone out of business. The zoo animal market was deeply depressed. So an effort had to be made to try and keep the Big Show going.

John Kelley was intimately involved in all of this. He saw John Ringling as infirm and near financial collapse. To him the better deal for himself was to join with the Ringling women and the Sam Gumpertz-Allied Owners faction. Yet, John Ringling thought of Honest John as his attorney. [See: for example, letter of July 15, 1935 from John Ringling to his art advisor Julius Böhler in the Ringling Museums, Sarasota] Ringling realized too late that



The five Ringling brothers with Barnum and Bailey.

Kelley was in league with those arrayed against him.

John Ringling was effectively shut out of circus decision making after 1932. At a meeting of the directors of the new Ringling-Barnum corporation in Sarasota in November 1932, Sam Gumpertz had been installed as Vice President and General Manager. John Ringling continued as President of the show, but it was a hollow title with no authority at all over circus matters. He remained the President until his death from pneumonia in New York on December 2, 1936 at age 70. He was the longest lived of all the brothers.

The Ringling-Barnum route books of 1936 and 1937 make no mention whatever of his death nor does

the circus program for 1937. Instead, the 1937 route book has a warm tribute to Joseph Mayer, long time publisher of the circus programs. John Ringling was forgotten, a sad turn of events.

The turmoil that surfaced in July 1932 had been simmering in the form of resentment by Edith Ringling ever since the death of her husband Charles (John's brother) on December 3, 1926. It came to a head with the events described in Kelley's affidavit. However, that was only the opening salvo in a long war between Ringling family members for control of the circus.

Except for a few years of relative tranquility, the family wrangle lasted almost until John Ringling North sold out in 1967. The new owners were brothers Irvin and Israel Feld and Judge Roy Hofheinz. Ringling family ownership was thus ended.

A good question arises as to how much credibility can be given to the Kelley affidavit. It is certainly troubling from an ethical standpoint. It

A painting of John Ringling.





does not seem to have bothered Kelley that some of the things he said could not have been known to him except through privileged and confidential information gained by him as John Ringling's attorney. Essentially he switched sides in a classic conflict of interest. The affidavit was freely and voluntarily given. Its tenor opposed John Ringling and favored the others when he should have stood aside altogether. Remember, he was a lawyer. The Canons of Professional Ethics, to which Honest John was bound, commanded that he recuse himself.

Two years after the subject affidavit was given, Honest John was indicted by a Federal Grand Jury in New York City for perpetuating one of the most monumental tax fraud schemes in U.S. history. From 1918 to 1932 he had filed, or participated in the filing, of fraudulent tax returns for the Ringling-Barnum circus partnership, avoiding millions in taxable income [See: *New York Times* for July 15, 1936].

Kelley was tried in New York in early 1938, was convicted by the jury, and sentenced to two years in prison plus a \$10,000 fine. The conviction was upheld on appeal. [See: *New York Times*, April 22, 1938, May 10, 1938, and July 18, 1939]. Thus, for much of the time covered by the affidavit, Honest John was busy "cooking the circus books" as it were. Incredible!

In their expose entitled *The Tax Dodgers*, Greenberg, New York (1948), p. 197, Elmer L. Irey and William Slocum said this about Kelley, "Of all the wonders on display at the Ringling Brothers-Barnum and Bailey Combined Shows, none was comparable to the miracles of gall perpetuated on Uncle Sam for fifteen years by the circus lawyer, 'Honest' John Kelley."

Ironically, within fifteen years of his conviction, Kelley was busy at work in Baraboo, Wisconsin founding the Circus World Museum. That went a long way toward restoring his reputation. He died on November 4, 1963 at age 90 - The Editor.



Mrs. Charles (Edith) Ringling.

Exhibit D

STATE OF NEW YORK,  
COUNTY OF NEW YORK

John M. Kelley being duly sworn,  
deposed and says;

Charles Ringling died on December 3, 1926, leaving his brother John Ringling as the only survivor of the original Ringling brothers. Charles Ringling throughout the period of their circus history since 1884 had been their chief management man. For the most part Charles Ringling engaged the acts, conferring with John Ringling, but John

John Ringling with Calvin Coolidge.



Ringling would habitually delay engagement of the acts, so for that reason Charles Ringling would often have to go ahead and engage the acts necessary. It was Charles Ringling who supervised almost wholly the work in winter quarters. It was Charles Ringling who gave personal attention to the miscellaneous details incident to the building of the show in winter quarters and its operation on the road. Outside of brief absences, Charles Ringling was continuously with the show. John Ringling was not. John Ringling would make occasional visits to the show, but it was Charles who was on the job managing the show.

Upon the death of Charles Ringling the co-partnership interests were as follows,

John Ringling-one-third interest

Edith Ringling (the widow of Charles Ringling)-one-third interest

Richard T. Ringling (now deceased, a nephew of Charles and John Ringling and the husband of Aubrey Ringling, later mentioned)-one-third interest.

Immediately upon the death of Charles Ringling, John Ringling allocated to himself supreme command of the co-partnership shows to the exclusion of the other partners, to every phase and part of the business. They never had a "look-in." They never had a statement of the show's business, save at the end of every year, when the bookkeeper sent out statements, which amounted only to detail of receipts and disbursements. These statements were without analysis; and from them little information could be had of the financial condition of the shows or the methods employed in management. No co-partnership meetings were ever held. John Ringling never called the other partners into counsel upon anything. On the contrary, they were completely and continuously ignored. There never was a firm distribution declared. Withdrawals from the show's cash were at his dictation and arbitrary, save checks signed by the



treasurer for current running obligations. John Ringling alone signed checks upon circus deposit accounts.

When Charles Ringling was alive he had private Pullman quarters on the circus train, and with him traveled his wife, Edith Ringling, who upon his death succeeded to his one-third interest. In the building of the circus she had worked with her husband in the detail of circus operation and was intimately conversant with circus building in winter quarters and circus operation.

When John Ringling took control no accommodations for Edith Ringling were provided on the circus train, and so supreme became the usurpation of management and control by John Ringling that the other partners were utterly ignored in every phase of the business. John Ringling carried his autocratic control so far that even when the other partners made a visit to the show they felt and knew that they were on unfriendly grounds. Even their presence, much less any idea of their participation in circus management, was to John Ringling provokingly distasteful, and this attitude on his part was repeatedly shown to me personally by John Ringling in extremely uncomplimentary references to his two partners.

When Charles Ringling died in September (sic), 1926, there was left behind him a working organization among the circus men which was sound and dependable--in other words so far as the physical movement of the show was concerned the circus could almost run itself. Management alone was required. For two or three years the loyalty and momentum and prosperity of the time carried the show along, but when the boom years passed, and John Ringling failed in the management, the circus was brought to the door of ruin in 1932.

I could give innumerable instances of John Ringling's mismanagement and neglect which resulted in financial damage to the show, but will mention only a few.

During the life of the five Ringling brothers it was the declared purpose that the circus and its members



Mrs. Richard (Aubrey) Ringling.

should not venture into other lines of business. They held strictly to the circus business. John Ringling alone branched out into the railroad business, the oil business and other lines. In the period following the death of Charles he gave more attention, both in the matter of his personal time and the work of his office, to his personal interests than he did to the circus business. This divergence of John Ringling into other lines of business was offensive to the brothers and particularly Charles. To assist him in these outside interests, John Ringling had a private secretary, Mr. Richard Fuchs, who had nothing whatever to do with the circus business.

On the death of Charles, John Ringling, as already stated, did not follow in his brother's footsteps and continue on the road with the show in direct constant management. By reason of this neglect, the show suffered greatly. The circus business is most exacting in its requirement of constant close attention to detail, and direct constant personal management, and a failure to provide this inevitably results in the ruin of the enterprise, as may be verified by review of the history of every circus in America. Only by reason of the loyalty of the organization built up by Charles Ringling did the Ringling

circus last as long as it did after his death.

Serious damage was done to the show through mismanagement in billing and routing the show and in the failure to prepare and build it up while in winter quarters.

In addition to the routine handling of the circus funds as already described, John Ringling acted as if the circus cash were his own. He bought bonds without consulting the other partners, and in many like ways acted as if he were the sole owner of the business.

In September 1929, John Ringling, without consulting his two other partners at all, purchased on his own account five smaller circuses from the Mugivan and Bowers interests, which I shall refer to as the corporation circuses. I knew nothing of this proposed purchase. I have been counsel in the Ringling circus interests for many years, and, measured by any price at which circuses of like kind have ever been sold or valued at, to my knowledge, this purchase price of \$1,700,000 was wholly out of line, I believe double what sound judgment would sanction.

In the railroad circus business in this country the profitable income period is from the opening of the season at Madison Square Garden until the Atlantic seaboard has been played, together with a few adjoining states, extending to about the first of July. Thereafter, the season is more speculative and less profitable. For more than half a century the Barnum & Bailey Circus and the Ringling Bros. Circus, with which it later combined, in Madison Square Garden enjoyed extraordinary profitable engagements, established dependable goodwill and held exclusively the showing in this Metropolitan District. Not only is the Madison Square Garden engagement important from the revenue derived but this engagement covers an indoor showing period without which engagement the circus on account of unseasonable weather could not venture on the road under canvas and seldom if ever did so earlier than



May. I understand that about June, 1929, the Madison Square Garden management notified John Ringling of the necessity of then engaging the Garden for that [next] season if he wanted it. One of John Ringling's characteristics in business is to stall and delay. He took a boat for Europe without closing the Madison Square contract, and on his return found that the competing Sells-Floto circus had "beat him to it" and had contracted for the Garden showing. He then took the alternative and purchased this and the other four circuses at the exorbitant price of \$1,700,000.

This purchase was of great detriment because, aside from the excessive price, it required an extension of management and the division of time and attention between the big circus and these other circuses, and furthermore, during the season of 1930 John Ringling withdrew from the Ringling partnership funds, without consulting the other partners, in the amount of \$52,700, and applied it on his above note of \$1,700,000, which at first he claimed was a personal transaction on his part in which his partners had no interest. The five purchased circuses during the 1929 season and for several years before were money-makers in the hands of their then owners and managers, but as soon as John Ringling took them over they began to lose money. Shortly after the purchase in the fall of 1929, John Ringling stated to me that he believed the purchased shows would be big money-makers and that he saw no reason why he should declare his partners "in" on the deal, but late in the 1930 season, when these circuses ran into heavy losses, he then said to me that he was going to bring in his other partners whether they wished it or not and make them share in the obligation which he had contracted for the purchases. Gradually under the management of John Ringling the big circus was brought financially to its knees. In the fall of 1931 there were not sufficient funds to equip the circus for the next season. In winter quarters it was not adequately repaired or



John and Mable Ringling.

renewed. Baggage wagons and railroad cars went out for the 1932 season the poorest equipped in the circus history. This lack of repair resulted in loss of revenue and excessive cost. In order to put the show out for the 1932 season he borrowed from Robert Ringling, the son of Edith Ringling, \$20,000, and also in order to get the circus on its feet for the season's operation he withdrew \$45,000 from the Al Ringling Theatre at Baraboo, Wisconsin, which was not

Sam Gumpertz.



a co-partnership unit.

Solicitous of their lifelong interests, and believing that the circus was on its last legs, Edith Ringling from Florida, and Aubrey Ringling from Montana, came on to New York in the latter part of May or the early part of June, 1932, and asked me to see John Ringling and ascertain what could be done to save the circus picture and protect their interests. He was insistent that they were "in with his on the above note." Heavy interest and principal payments on the \$1,700,000 note which John Ringling was satisfying in part out of the co-partnership assets were, with other features of his management, threatening the very life of the Ringling circus organization.

Upon the advice of John Ringling, Edith Ringling and Aubrey Ringling, I went to Florida with an outline of plans for incorporating the big circus as a possible way out, at least, of their internal differences. I consulted attorneys there and spent the entire week working out a plan which had for its advantage the transfer of the partnership assets to a corporation, with equal interest ownership of the stock, and a vote in the management by all the partners.

I returned from Florida around the middle of June and outlined in detail these plans to him, and to each of the partners. He was agreeable to the formation of a corporation, but would not agree to equal division of the stock and a share by the others in the management. He vehemently expressed his opposition to having either Edith Ringling or Aubrey Ringling participate in any way in the management or control by being an officer or member of the board of directors. The only concession he would make was a reduction to his salary from \$50,000 to \$40,000 a year. At a final conference with him at the Half Moon Hotel at Coney Island he stated to me that rather than give these ladies an interest in a corporation in which he would not have majority stock control and complete dictation of management, he would (waving his hands



towards the ocean) rather see the whole thing go down to the ocean."

About June 30, 1932, Mr. Greve and Mr. Pender, whom Mrs. Edith Ringling and Mrs. Richard Ringling had never met, called upon Mrs. Edith Ringling at her hotel for a few moments. I believe that Mrs. Aubrey Ringling was also present, although I am not sure. There followed various conferences between Messrs. Greve, Pender and myself in which they stated that they were discussing with John Ringling the question of incorporating the business, extending his note and I told them that this would be agreeable to the two Ringling ladies provided that they were given a voice in the management by being made directors of the corporation, and that adequate safeguards were taken against John Ringling's abuse of power and against any opportunity for a misuse of the circus funds. Mrs. Edith Ringling called her son Robert Ringling on here from Chicago to consult regarding these matters and both she and Aubrey Ringling authorized me to state that the plan was agreeable to them upon the conditions just stated.

The one hitch was John Ringling's insistence that the new corporation should sign the extension note and in that way subject the interests of Mrs. Edith Ringling and Mrs. Aubrey Ringling to it, for they believed that John Ringling's original loan had not been a partnership transaction and that they were not liable upon it. John Ringling stated that he had engaged counsel and was to institute litigation for the purpose of assuming complete command of all the circus interests. This might have resulted in a receivership and the ruin of the entire business. Accordingly Mrs. Edith Ringling and Mrs. Aubrey Ringling finally consented that the new corporation should go on the note as they felt that by doing this the new plan would go through and thus afford them the only way out of the dangerous situation in which they found themselves.

In the next few days I had various conferences with Mr. Siegel who prepared the first draft of the papers and I made several suggestions, a few at the request of John Ringling, which were incorporated in them. During the same period I had various conversations with Mrs. Edith Ringling and Mrs. Aubrey Ringling and prior to the general meeting on July 14, 1932, these ladies had agreed to the setup as embodied in the final draft of papers. During this period I also called on Mr. John Ringling several times in connection with tax matters and he mentioned generally the plans that were under way for an incorporation of the circus and seemed most anxious that the other two partners would come in and join on the note and that the business should be incorporated. In one of these conversations he stated to me that he had consented to accept a reduction in salary from \$50,000 to \$40,000.

To sign the preliminary agreements, we met on the evening of July 14, 1932 in the sitting room in the suite of Mr. Gumpertz at the Half Noon Hotel at Coney Island, about 8:00 or 8:30 in the evening; there were present, John Ringling and Messrs. Gumpertz, Greve, Pender, Siegel and myself.

Later a notary, Mrs. Nelkin, came in and took the acknowledgements. Mrs. Edith Ringling and Mrs. Aubrey Ringling were not there at the time nor in the hotel. The papers were submitted to Mr. Ringling and

The Half Moon Hotel at Coney Island, New York.

Mr. Siegel explained them paragraph by paragraph reading verbatim every paragraph except merely formal clauses. Mr. Ringling then took the papers and read them over himself. A draft of the voting trust agreement was attached to one of the agreements and Mr. Ringling seemed particularly interested in the provisions concerning directors, officers and salaries. The agreements provided that certain action could be taken only by the vote of five directors and he studied over the names and apparently made combinations of what possibly five directors could accomplish. He asked a number of questions especially concerning the powers of the voting trustees, directors and officers and a general discussion ensued which took five or six hours. John Ringling made certain requests for changes which were then inserted in the papers in pen and ink.

Nothing whatever was said at this meeting about attaching the circus at Steubenville, Ohio or at any other place or that the Sheriff at Steubenville was waiting for a long distance call to make the attachment. Nor did Mr. Greve say to John Ringling that he would have to put all his assets in the bag and hand them over to Mr. Greve. Nor did Mr. Ringling state that the note was not in default and that New York Investors, Inc. had in its possession \$180,000 or upwards realized from the sale of the Derby mortgage from which interest could be paid. Nor did anyone say to John Ringling that the note was still held by the bank, nor did Mr. Ringling demand that he be

given the right to procure counsel, nor did Mr. Greve reply that there was no time to get counsel and that Mr. Siegel would represent him well enough. Nor was John Ringling told that the agreement of July 14, 1932 gave him a general moratorium until November 6, 1937. Lastly, John Ringling made no protest whatever against the execution of the agreements.

At this meeting on July 14, 1932, Mr. Ringling





had a bandage on his foot, as a result, I understood, of an infection from which he was then recuperating but aside from this he appeared in excellent health and in perfect command of his faculties. He gave no evidence at all of any abnormal temperature. Over a period of twenty-five years association with John Ringling involving consideration of many written instruments which called for analysis, consideration and execution, I have come to know his characteristic habits very well. On the evening of July 14, 1932, he was his habitual self in reading over the papers himself and asking many questions about them before he signed. At this meeting he was not nervous or impatient. He was deliberate and took plenty of time. He smoked cigars almost continuously, did not call for a nurse or other treatment and took no medicine. He expressed his belief to those present that his leg was improving and that it shortly would be entirely well again. The meeting lasted until somewhere around two o'clock in the morning and he showed no signs of fatigue or over-exertion.

After this meeting I had several conferences with Mr. Siegel, going over the drafts of the certificate of incorporation and by-laws and the bill of sale from the partnership to the corporation. Various suggestions which I made were incorporated in these documents including a provision for payment by the corporation of income taxes incident to the operations of the partnership before the transfer. This was as a result of a conversation with John Ringling in which he said that unless some provision were made of that nature the partners would find themselves without cash with which to pay their income taxes as all the cash balance of the partnership was being turned over to the corporation.

The first meeting of the Board of Directors of the new corporation was held on July 26, 1932 at the Half Moon Hotel, in Coney Island. All seven directors were present, namely, John Ringling, Mrs. Edith Ringling, Mrs. Aubrey Ringling, Messrs. Gumpertz, Greve, Pender and myself. Mr. Siegel was also present. John Ringling came into

the room with a cane and presided. The by-laws were read over article by article and word for word. John Ringling went over especially the draft of the voting trust agreement, the bill of sale from the partnership to the corporation and other papers and signed these. He called for "Ayes" and "Nos" on the various resolutions and they were all carried unanimously. The meeting lasted for two and a half hours or more. Again John Ringling appeared in excellent health and made no protests about anything.

In July 1932 neither Mrs. Edith Ringling or Mrs. Aubrey Ringling or myself had any intention of changing Mr. Ringling's position as general manager or his salary of \$40,000 provided he remained physically able for the job and ran it properly. We never stated, however, to him, that, however he ran the business he would be continued in the management.

From this time on Mr. Ringling began to neglect the business even more than ever. There were many indications of mismanagement and we also received information that the funds of the corporation were being diverted to Mr. Ringling's personal use. It was also sustaining heavy losses.

For these reasons all of the directors agreed that for the good of the corporation and its stockholders the

general management should be taken away from John Ringling and transferred to Mr. Gumpertz. This change was voted on at a meeting of the Board of Directors held on November 6, 1932 at which all of the directors were present, namely, John Ringling, Mrs. Edith Ringling, Mrs. Aubrey Ringling and Messrs. Gumpertz, Greve, Pender and myself. The motion was unanimously carried by all the directors present including John Ringling, himself. John Ringling remained as president of the corporation and notwithstanding the fact that he was no longer the general manager, his salary of \$40,000 was continued until a year later when in November it was reduced to \$5,000.

There is no merit whatsoever in the charge that Mrs. Edith Ringling, Mrs. Aubrey Ringling and myself conspired with the other interested parties to deprive John Ringling of his control of the business or anything else. The only reason that we voted for the change was that we were firmly convinced that John Ringling was no longer able or willing to run the business in an efficient and honest manner.

Sworn and subscribed to before as this 30th day of May 1934. Signed John M. Kelley.

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Circus manager Carl Hathaway and Edith Ringling.



# Johnny Patterson

## The Rambler From Clare

By Harry Bradshaw

The majority of Irish popular emigrant songs were written in the latter part of the last century in the wake of the mass exodus which followed the famine years. Some of the more maudlin still retain their popularity at misty eyed Irish-American gatherings. But perhaps the most enduring were written by a Clare born comedian cum circus clown. His songs were gay and witty and retain their freshness a hundred years later. The songs were composed by Johnny Patterson, the self styled Rambler from Clare.

John Francis Patterson was born in 1840 in his father's road-side forge house in Kilbarron on the outskirts of the village of Feakle in County Clare. His father, Francis Patterson, a nailer gunsmith was one of a family of nailers (blacksmiths) in the area, originally coming from the North of Ireland. John's mother died after the birth of her fourth child and within a year his father also died, causing the orphaned Patterson children to be put in the care of relatives. The two girls were sent to Killaloe; the younger son Frank, was taken by an O'Houlihan family in Feakle; and the 3 years old Johnny was sent to the home of his uncle Mark, a nailer in the nearby town of Ennis.

Following family tradition, Johnny was apprenticed to the nailer's trade. But as the boy showed a great liking for music, his uncle set him on the road to becoming a musician by enrolling him in the army as a drummer boy at 14. There were about 30,000 soldiers in Ireland at the time, scattered in posts all over the country. The most likely regiment for Johnny's army service as a drummer boy was the 63rd Foot, an infantry regiment based in the nearby city of Limerick.

As a young boy growing up Johnny had seen the worst effects of the famine of 1847 in his town. The



Johnny Patterson. All illustrations are from the Pfening Archives unless otherwise credited.

scenes of poverty misery and emigration made a deep impression on his mind and were in years to come provided inspiration for many of his songs. But his childhood was not all sadness for later he was to write a song about his youthful days in Ennis about a shop known locally as a meeting place for the boys and girls of the town, "The Stone Outside Dan Murphy's Door."

"There's a sweet garden spot in our mem'ry,

"It's the place we were born and reared;

"Tis long years ago since we left it,

"But return there we will if we're spared.

"Our friends and companions of childhood

"Would assemble each night near

a score,

"Round Dan Murphy's shop  
and how often we've sat

"On the stone outside Dan  
Murphy's door."

Because of his army band training Johnny had become a competent musician and was an expert on the piccolo and drums. However on the completion of 5 years service, he looked for a way of leaving. His problem was solved when the circus of John Swallow came to town. He got a job in the circus band after buying himself out of his regiment for 20 pounds.

It was the custom at the time with traveling shows to have benefit performances at which certain members of the company received all the takings to boost their earnings, and at the end of a Cork engagement, Swallow gave one for the band. One of the bandmen was asked to do a

solo act as a novelty and Johnny volunteered to tell some jokes and sing songs in the ring. The audience loved it and shouted for more. The circus boss watched the act and realized its potential. Next morning the young Johnny was summoned to John Swallow's caravan and offered a job as a clown. Johnny accepted and signed a two year contract that included two benefit performances and was to be billed as "The Irish Singing Clown." One of the other acts was James and Selena Hickey; a brother and sister bareback riding duo from Scotland who, being in the same age group as Johnny, became good friends and this encouraged him in his new role.

During the following two seasons with Swallow's troupe he experimented with his new act. He discarded the accepted costume of the circus clown to wear instead a neat tweed outfit with shamrocks embroidered



on the sleeves and legs and a Celtic harp on his chest. Knee length white stockings, a cone shaped hat and a drooping handlebar moustache completed his costume. Johnny's aim was to create a new style of clowning, appealing to the audience through Irish songs and wit, and although the people were at low ebb from the effects of the famine and emigration he maintained they had an inbuilt sense of humor and a readiness to laugh.

When the show arrived in a town

Johnny would inquire what the local news was, who the local "characters" were, and by the evening's performance would have composed a rhyme or story. Finding suitable songs hard to get, he began to write his own. One of his first songs was "The Roving Irish Boy."

"I am a roving Irish boy; I've seen some ups and downs sirs,

"So to satisfy my mind I've turned to be a clown, sirs,

"I was born in the County Clare, next door to Tipperary,

"Where they'd make a traitor stare with a clout of a shillelagh."

Johnny spoke fluent Irish and mixed colloquial expressions in Irish and English into a blend, understood and appreciated by the people. Many of his songs of this period have been lost but a remaining example "The Dingle Puck Goat" gives an idea of his style:

"He'd bate all the bailiffs the Maguls and the Caliphs.

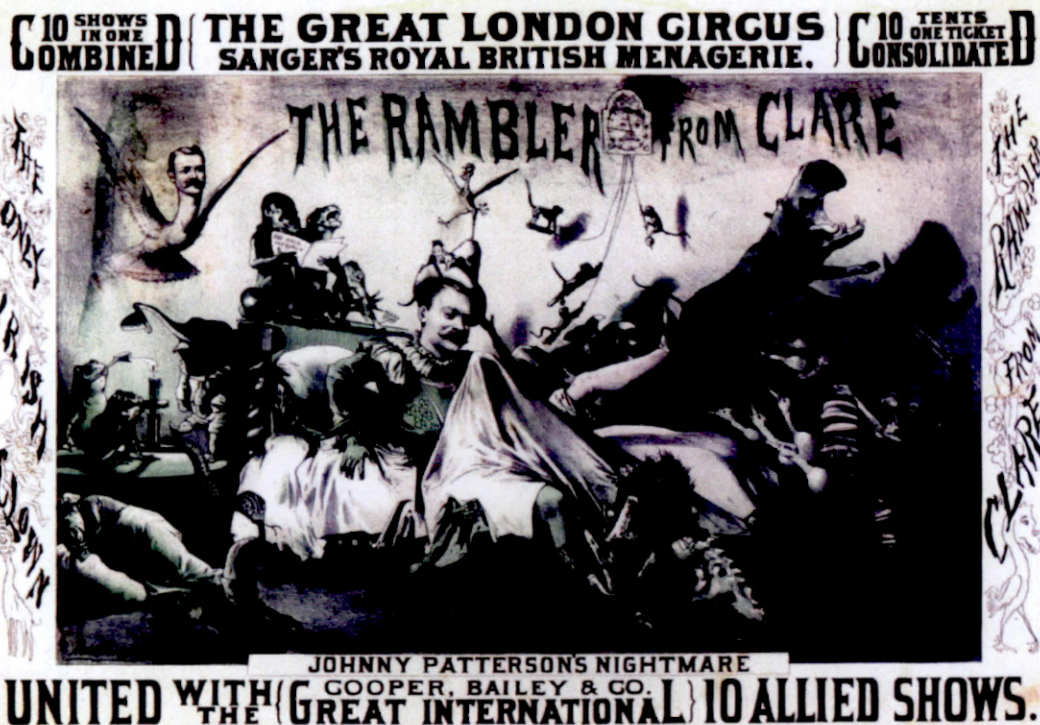
"All the shulers and rulers from Cork to Bagdad,

"He'd make them out capers to put in the papers,

"With one puck from his horn, he would drive them all mad.

"For that bright Saxon shilling he never was willing

"Still held go to the polls for ould Ireland to vote,



This Cooper, Bailey & Co. lithograph featuring Patterson was used in 1879. Circus World Museum collection.

"For a fight ne'er relaxin' he was there for the axin'

"That warlike old bucko, the Dingle Puck Goat."

Swallow eventually left Ireland and Johnny continued his act with Batty's and then Risarelli's circuses. In 1867 he appeared at "The Theatre" Mary Street, Cork, with the Pablo Fanque circus. Pablo Fanque (an Anglo-African rope dancer whose real name was William Darby) offered the rising clown an engagement in Liverpool. When Johnny sailed for Liverpool in 1869 he found his old friends James and Selena Hickey booked on the same bill. By the end of the season Johnny and Selena had fallen in love and married in Liverpool. Around this time he composed one of his most successful songs "The Garden Where the Praties Grow."

"Have you ever been in love boys, or did you ever feel the pain,

"I'd rather be in gaol myself than be in love again,

"Though the girl I loved was beautiful, I'd have you all to know

"That I met her in the garden where the praties grow."

In 1870 the Patterson's first child,

Bridget, was born and in the following seasons the family played with shows all over England. In 1872 they were with Lord George Sanger's Circus, but after the birth of their second daughter, Nora, they returned home to work in Ireland.

In 1875 Johnny, then a clown with Powell and Clarke's Circus, while returning to the show grounds after the mid-day parade through Killarney was given a wire telling him that Selena, who had remained in the winter base in Belfast, had given birth to a son. The jubilant father bought up all the seats for the matinee and brought the entire company on a boat trip on the lakes of Killarney to celebrate the event. The child was named Johnny junior. That night, June 1st 1875, he added an additional verse to "The Garden Where the Praties Grow."

"Now her parents they consented and we're blessed with children three

"Two girls just like their Mammy and a boy the image of me,

"I'll train up the children in the way that they should go

"And I'll never forget the garden where the praties grow."

By the age of 35, Johnny was a national success, "endowed," a critic said, "with the gift of repartee and a singing voice designed to bring about audience participation. He could hold



audiences in his hands, making them laugh or cry. He had the test of a real clown, pathos on the verge of laughter, humor on the verge of tears."

American circuses had long realized the audience potential of the Irish immigrant community and were always on the lookout for new talent. Word of Johnny's act reached Cooper and Bailey's Circus and an agent was dispatched to engage him. Realizing that an opportunity like this might never present self again, he signed a one year contract. It is not clear what relationship existed between him and his wife at this time, but on his departure for America, the three children were put in the care of his sister Betty, now married in Killaloe, while Selena continued her own circus career. So in 1876, Johnny set out to conquer America. Writing what must have been one of the first advertising jingles, he penned the now forgotten "Cunard Line."

"On the 17th of March which is known as Patrick's Day,

"From out the River Mersey the Batavia sailed away;

"We first put in at Queenstown for passengers and the mail,

"Then our ship she slewed around and for America did sail."

A Songster issued by the Great London Circus. Published by DeWitt.



For would be emigrants, he concluded with the advice:

"Now I'll give advice to all my friends who think of leaving home,

"To travel by the Cunard Line when ere they wish to roam;

"For safety and civility I'm sure they take the shine,

"Oh, there's no boats half so jolly as the Cunard Line."

How lucky Johnny must have considered himself as he sailed to America as a comfortable cabin passenger when he could so easily have been among the thousands of his countrymen who made the same journey under sadder conditions as destitute emigrants, and he now composed an emigrant song which became popular all over America: "Goodbye Johnny Dear."

On landing in America Johnny quickly adapted to the faster pace of life and realized that he needed that extra something that would make his act stand out from the countless others on the market. The stage Irishman was emerging at this time, but Johnny would not change his act. While prepared to laugh at himself as an Irishman, he wanted to show there was something deeper in the Irish, a sharp native wit, a keen sense of humor and a musical appreciation. He recalled a song he had learned as a boy and adapted it as his signature tune. The song "The Rambler from Clare" was an old ballad dating from the rising of 1798, but it suited him perfectly and he was billed in America as "Johnny Patterson, The Rambler From Clare."

Cooper and Bailey's was one of the biggest touring shows in America. Even the biggest shows Johnny had worked on at home seemed tiny in comparison. Undaunted, he rose to the occasion and was an immediate success, especially in predominately Irish areas. The critic of the *Miner's Journal* passed over the show attractions and wrote in his column: "Cooper and Bailey's is the greatest show on earth but the most wonderful feature of the show is something which years ago was abandoned as unattainable, a clown with sufficient nerve and brains to be original. They have this "Rara Avis" and his name



A different Great London songster published by the New York Popular Publishing Co.

is Johnny Patterson; he is the best clown to invade this region for many years."

His success was assured and his contract renewed for a second season during which he appeared before packed houses in Gilmore's Garden (later Madison Square Garden), New York. The *New York Clipper* reported; "What made Patterson so unique a figure among the clowns of his day, was his spontaneity of wit and his fresh and unconventional humor." Johnny kept up a prolific output of songs with titles such as "Bridget Donahue," "A Typical Irishman," "The Hat my Father Wore," and "Old Ireland is the Country I was Born in."

The *St. Louis Democrat* commented, "It remained for Johnny Patterson the noted humorist and vocalist to eclipse any other clown seen in St. Louis. His song "Bridget Donahue" has a catchy air and will no doubt be hummed by every boy in the city before the close of the week."

At the end of his second season, Johnny decided to remain in America. Some of his many engagements in the following years included Tony Pastor's Theatre in New York in 1877, the Theatre Comique, also in



New York City, in 1878, and Howes' Great London Circus for the touring seasons of 1877 and 1878. In early 1879 appeared at the Theatre Olympic in Brooklyn. The publishing house of De Witt brought out a booklet of his songs and jokes.

He was back with Cooper and Bailey in 1879, and 1880. He toured with Batchelor and Doris in 1881 and 1882, and Doris's Great Inter-Ocean Circus in 1883. To make his act even more Irish he bought an old set of Uileann pipes, a traditional instrument something like bagpipes, and was soon a competent player, delighting audiences with traditional Irish airs and versions of his songs, combining the rather unorthodox sound of Uileann pipes and a circus band,

At the height of his success sad news reached Johnny from home. His younger daughter Nora, who had joined her mother's show, and had been killed in an accident involving an elephant. But despite being separated from his family, he could not leave the glamour and wealth he found in America. For consolation he turned to alcohol.

In 1881, while on Batchelor and Doris, the *Chicago Times* became an admirer when its columnist wrote with stage Irish gusto: "Patterson is a broth of a boy with a rich tuneful brogue that is pleasant to the ear. He is one of the professionals in that line and has not permitted himself to get into a rut. He is a bright companionable fellow, full of anecdote and native wit. Americans admire him and his countrymen have cause to be proud of him."

His output of new songs continued with such titles as "Barney Hare," "A Good Roarin 'Fire," "Shake Hands with your Uncle Dan," "Only a Clown," "My Love She's Gone Away," "Cincinnati in the State of Ohio Ho," and his recently rediscovered homesick ballad "Castles in the Air." Here are some of the lyrics from this masterpiece:

"This world is all a bubble, no matter where we go,

"There's nothing here but trouble, hardship, toil, and woe,

"Go where we will, do what we may, we are never free from care,

"And at best this world is but a castle in the air.



Patterson with his Uileann pipes.

"And yet each being loves the land where he sported as a child,

"The very savage loves his plain, his woods and prairies wild,

"And I, with a true Irish heart, still wish in Ireland there

"To sit among her groves and build my Castles in the Air."

By the time he was 45 Johnny was finding it hard to keep up the pace of American circus life, so after an absence of 9 years he decided to return home. He had accumulated a lot of money and before leaving he was presented with a diamond studded broach, shaped as a harp, in appreciation of his clowning and song writing. Perhaps the critique that gave him the most satisfaction was the one written by the *New York Sunday Dispatch*: "The songs written by Patterson are full of real Irish humor, and unlike many other so-called delineators of Irish character he tries to elevate his fellow countrymen in the eyes of the public rather than degrade them."

Back in Ireland in 1885, Johnny was reunited with his family and he bought a house at 77 Corporation Street, Belfast, where his wife Selena was based. Johnny was still a big name in Ireland despite his absence.

He planned to put his own circus on the road, but in the meantime joined Lloyd's Mexican Circus. He now had star quality about him and lived up to his reputation. A visitor to one of Lloyd's venues noted "the Irish clown from New York, in the midst of all self satisfied, bland and smoking a large cigar." He was also drinking heavily, but always paced himself. A colleague said, "It was customary for Patterson to have a glass of good Irish whiskey at breakfast and this continued in lesser amounts for most of the day." He was never fully inebriated, but habitually mellow and good natured.

There were, however, exceptions. Circus owner James Lloyd wrote in his biography of the following incident which occurred in Cookstown: "Patterson got drunk and went into the ring to do his act, during which he began to run me down and told the audience that I was a Protestant and ought not to be in Ireland. Those of the clown's faith got up from their seats and were halfway into the ring when I asked Patterson what was the cause of all this. I told the audience I engaged Patterson from America and he was earning 18 pounds a week, so he was not doing bad by me. I stood firm and told the audience that they had not paid their money for this unseemly conduct. The show continued. After Patterson had sung his songs and left the ring, I said to him, 'Johnny, I never thought you'd treat me as you have done after being such good friends.' He apologized for his behavior and as he had now sobered up, I asked him to do me a favor, 'Sure Mr. Lloyd,' he said, so at my request he went back into the ring and apologized to the audience."

During March of 1886 Fred Ginnett's circus, playing at Earlsfort Terrace, Dublin, proudly advertised "the world renowned Patterson." At the end of the month Johnny played a week's engagement at Dan Lowrey's Star Variety Theatre (now the Olympia) billed as "the famous Hibernian clown and Irish piper." He was then booked as principal clown for Powell and Clarke's Great Paragon Circus which was touring Ireland. This was a big show with 130 horses, 35 carriages, elephants, camels, a staff of 120 and a big top which could accommodate 7000.



During the summer, the show crossed the path of Keeley's Circus, a small competitor owned by an Australian named Joe Keeley. He had previously run a circus called Lovett, Keeley and Ohmy. A description of Keeley's circus tells us: "It was not a big show, 12 wagons, 20 horses and a one pole tent. Keeley acted as proprietor, tent master and ringmaster." Johnny briefly met Keeley.

# WINDSOR, FRIDAY, JUNE 29.

—The Great Inter-Ocean has tonight announced that it has a grand night to give, and carries its advertisements on to the Friday—the 29th (To-morrow) Evening.

## COMING TO WINDSOR ON THE FIFTH ANNUAL TOUR!

### A GRAND CONSOLIDATION

## JOHN B. DORIS' GREAT INTER-OCEAN

### LARGEST AND BEST SHOW ON EARTH.

## MONSTER MILLIONAIRE MENAGERIE.

### Megatherium Museum and Double-Ring Circus!

Unparalleled in Palace, Expansive in Attractions and Enlarged to General Excursion Requiring for its transportation

### 3—PALACE RAILWAY TRAINS—3

Especially constructed for the purpose, and loaded and built, as they be it, representing an actual output of \$1,000,000, embracing a greater class of and more varied, than is so-and, involving that have ever before been combined under one management. The world's greatest show.

## Superb Double Ring Circus!

CONTAINING A PERFECT CONSTELLATION OF 1000 ARABIAN STARS, led by

### WILLIAM SHOWLES

The Phenomenal Rider. The Champion of the Champions Showing Horses on Earth. Unsurpassing any previous rider that ever stood upon a horse.

### ELLA STOKES, America's Pride.

The acknowledged most beautiful and most bewitching Equine Artist in either Europe or America.

### SALLIE MARKS, the Pleasing, Popular, Petite Premier of the Arena.



## THE "FAZEL"

The Roman Cannon Ball, for years the reigning attraction of all Europe. One in the only animal—

### Prince Sanyama's Royal Japanese Circus!

A complete exhibition in itself. A full company of those marvelous jugglers, Necromancers, Pygmies, Magicians and acrobats, and the best ever in America.

Prof. John Wingfield's Dog Circus, 10 Canine Marvels. Best Educated Animals seen.

### MIL JOHN PATTERSON,

The Instructor from Clara. Irish Humour, Conventionalist and W. The Funniest and most original

### THE THREE SIEGEST RHOBIOT SHOWS!

The Imperial Aerobics bring of track, showing the distinctions of their late Emperor, Napoleon III.

### THE THREE ROYAL RUSSIAN ATHLETES.

From the Imperial Gymnasium at St. Petersburg to St. Moscow, in America by leave of His Majesty, the Czar.

EM! In addition to those are an almost numberless lot of lesser lights, making up the roster of the Best Circus Company of this time.

## The Grand Free Street Demonstration

Takes place daily at 10 A. M., and comprises in magnitude and magnificence all other parades ever seen in America. Among the series of features in the procession are the Acrobats, the Jugglers, the Circus, the Terrestrial Animal Exhibitions, by the \$10,000 PRIZE BEASTS OF THE WORLD. It is nearly three hours' riding in length and takes nearly an hour to form and give.

### Excursion Trains will be Run on all Railroads.

DOORS OPEN at 1 and 7 P. M. PERFORMANCE begins an HOUR LATER.

**NOTE: SPECIAL!—One Ticket Admits to all Advertised Shows.**

Keeley and Patterson's Circus took to the road in 1887. Johnny's 12 year old son wanted to become a circus artist and was brought along to learn the business. Johnny's name, as expected, attracted the customers and business boomed. In the spring, the show visited the small County Westmeath town of Castlepollard. Johnny stayed in Hugh Coghlan's

Johnny was worried about the



political situation in the country, as the issue of Irish independence from Britain was the talk of the day. He came to the conclusion that the only way for the country to go forward was to unite behind Charles Stewart Parnell, the leader of the home rule movement, so he became a committed supporter. At the height of his Belfast controversy he reckoned the time had come to make a stand for his convictions, thus taking a step which was to prove fatal. He wrote a political song which called on Irishmen, Loyalist and Nationalist, to forget their differences and to work together through industry and full employment to build their country. He titled the song "Do Your Best for One Another." It was never published; a couple of disjointed lines are all that remain of it today.

The circus continued on its way through the season of 1889, but business started to decline. Joe Keeley, like Johnny, was a heavy drinker which caused problems. One of the performers described the situation: "Business was none too good; there seemed to be bad feelings all through the show, bosses, artists, band, and even tentmen seemed unsettled. When in drink, Keeley was generally to be found asleep in the horse tent, while Patterson, on the other hand, stopped at the best hotel in town where he would be feted by all and sundry, and would come on in his buggy and trotting cob next morning late, sometimes too late for the matinee, Keeley would have two or three weeks of these "do's" at a time, then he would straighten up.

On Monday the 27th of May, the circus arrived in the Kerry town of Tralee where Johnny decided to perform his new song. There are two versions of the events which followed and today, over a century later, it is impossible to prove which of them is true. The account given by several independent eye witnesses and later written down by Johnny's 13 year old son goes: Johnny came into the ring and sang "Do Your Best for One Another." He carried a small flag in each hand, one was green and embroidered with the harp; the other was red and bore the crown. During the song he symbolically mingled the two flags together in supposed friendship, but some of the audience

being members of a secret society calling themselves "The New Irishmen" objected to his sentiment of co-operation with the crown, and hurled abuse at him. Other sections of the audience sprang to his defense and arguments developed quickly, turning into a fierce fight. While attempting to save the circus equipment Johnny was struck on the head with an iron bar and then kicked before the staff could rescue him. A local doctor named Fitzmaurice arrived on the scene, and the patched up Johnny was brought back to



A drawing of Johnny Patterson.

Sullivan's Hotel where he was staying and told not to travel with the show until his wounds had healed. Joe Keeley took the show on to its next engagements while Johnny recovered.

On Thursday his illness took a turn for the worst and his doctor ordered him into the Tralee Fever Hospital. By Friday evening his condition had steadied. "Goodnight Patterson," Dr. Fitzmaurice said as he was leaving. "I'll see you in the morning." Johnny replied, "You may see me doctor, but I won't see you." That night, 31st of May 1889, he died of pneumonia.

The following afternoon while the circus was playing in the nearby town of Adare, the ringmaster slowly walked to the centre of the ring, stopped the show and read a wire to the audience, telling them that Johnny had died. Johnny junior remembered that moment: "The audience went down on their knees and said a prayer, then the band played a slow 'Goodbye Johnny Dear.'"

The following day, Sunday, he was buried in the New Cemetery Tralee

in the family plot of a friend, Ted Eager.

The local newspaper, however, gave a different version of Johnny's death. The *Kerry Sentinel* reported: "Monday night being unusually wet, Mr. Patterson contracted a severe cold which gave him congestion of the lungs. He was admitted to the hospital, but his medical attendant could give no hope whatever of his recovery. The *Clare Journal*, carried this account: "A scene took place on Monday night when Johnny Patterson came into the ring with an embroidered harp on his back, but over it appeared the crown. This did not suit the Nationalist sentiment of a few of the audience, who hissed, but finally the majority of the audience put down the hisses and Johnny proceeded with his song."

The official death certificate did not refer to a fight, but it described the twice married Johnny as a bachelor, their information not being accurate.

Joe Keeley and Johnny's widow, Bridget, tried to keep the show going, but without their star attraction, business diminished rapidly and the circus soon disbanded. Records show that less than six months later, Keeley married Bridget in the Fermanagh village of Maguiresbridge. But we are told, "Keeley did not run much longer. His health, worry etc., finally accounted for his death." Bridget then made a third attempt at happiness by marrying Walter Brewer, second clown on Keeley and Patterson's Circus.

Johnny junior went to live with his sister in Killaloe after his father's death, but within a year was working with a circus again. In later years, he ran his own small circus in Ireland, often mistaken for his famous father, but most of his life was spent on shows in England and America. He died in Liverpool in 1950.

Thus was broken the Patterson family link with the circus, but for Johnny Patterson, The Rambler From Clare, his fame as a songwriter is assured. In 1985 a memorial was unveiled on Johnny's grave. In 1989, the centenary of his death, the Ennis Arts Festival paid tribute to Ireland's famous clown and used a circus theme for their program of events.



# Bill Woodcock's Circus Album

During the winter at the Kelly-Miller Circus quarters in Hugo, Oklahoma, everybody would gather in the office to cut up jackpots before the elephant training started. Once my dad remarked that in the 1920s Fred Buchanan always closed the performance of his Robbins Bros. Circus with a spec called "Historic America." Cast members portrayed Washington, Lincoln, etc. Cowboys dressed up as Roosevelt's Rough Riders would thunder around the track, and for a finale a tall clown and a show broad would pose in the center ring as Uncle Sam and the Statue of Liberty while everyone else was stationed throughout the tent waving American flags. Camel Dutch Narfski would then fire the cannon, ending the show. On one occasion Dutch's boy overloaded the cannon and he blew the canvas out of the back end of the big top. After Dutch

finished his story, D. R. Miller mentioned that he knew a place that supplied Civil War costumes and weapons, thinking this spec could work on his circus. Jimmy Rossi and I usually spent our free time terrorizing the Hugo damozels, but on this occasion we decided the reasonable thing to do was to try on the uniforms that had just arrived.

Jimmy was the son of band-leader Joe Rossi. His mother Mary later married Obert Miller. Jimmy and I remained life long friends. He was good with the ladies. In our Hugo days we called Jimmy "the sheik," and his car the "sheik-mobile." He became a Captain for American Airlines. After retirement he bought a jet plane and

appeared in air shows doing mock aerial combat. A couple of years ago, I read in the paper that he had died in a crash returning from a show in the Caribbean. Just like that 50 years of friendship gone.

I love this picture taken on the Sparks Circus in the 1920s. All it says on the back is "Rose Alexander of the Alexander troupe." This is a good example of how basic circus life was. The perform-



ers had a couple of buckets outside waiting for the water wagon to come by to fill up and Ms. Alexander would have a collapsible rack in her trunk on which she could hang things and that was about it.

When we showed in urban areas my mother would go marching off the lot with a bundle of dirty clothes, knock on doors until she found some woman with a washing machine. She would always offer to pay but more often than not it would turn into a social event and sometimes she might even bring back cookies as well.

In poorer neighborhoods it was just the opposite. The people would come on the lot with food for sale and offers to perform various services. On the Cole show I once overheard one of the candy butchers say, "I wonder if Sally and Suzie will be by this year?" My wildest fantasy was to actually catch a glimpse of Sally or Suzie.





# The Mysterious Mr. Kelty

By Fred D. Pfening, Jr.

Forty years after his death there is still interest in the circus photographs taken by Edward J. Kelty in the 1920s and 1930s. Original 12 x 20-inch Kelty prints sell on eBay for as much as \$500.

Kelty was born in 1888. He was a photographer for a San Francisco newspaper before joining the Navy in World War I. After the war he settled in New York City and worked for various commercial photographers. In 1922 he went on his own, forming Century Flashlight Photographers. Using a 12 x 20-inch tripod camera with flash powder to illuminate large rooms, he found success. He also used a smaller 11 x 14-inch camera for smaller groups and individuals. The cameras used cut film rather than glass plates. His work was mainly weddings and large groups in hotel ballrooms. Later he photographed boxing matches, school groups and graduations.

In 1921 he began photographing the side show attractions at Coney Island. He soon saw the potential in expanding his business to include circuses. Kelty bought a large van truck and equipped it with a dark-room, and started off after circuses in New York and nearby states. Taking his pictures at mid-day, he quickly developed them and sold prints later the same day for \$1. He posed circus personnel in large groups, which provided many customers for the same image. However, he paid a five percent commission to the shows for their cooperation.

Kelty's artistic ability shows in his photos. Each is neatly identified. In some cases he included the show's logo on the print by adding the identification in white lettering on the negatives. He sold the prints for \$1.25 each or \$12 for a dozen. He kept the \$1.25 price until at least 1935.

Business was good, not only selling

to circus employees, but also to publications and circus fans. He published his first list, Coney Island side show subjects and a few of Ringling-Barnum freaks, in 1925.

A 1926 list provided photos of other circuses including groups on Walter L. Main; Sparks, 101 Ranch Wild West and Sells-Floto. His 1927 list totaled 34 images with shots of Ringling-Barnum, Mighty Haag, Christy Bros., Downie Bros., Hagenbeck-Wallace, Sells-Floto, Nat Reiss, and Gangler's Novelty Circus.

The 1928 list included more shows than in previous seasons. Eldridge & Bentum, Gentry Bros., Hunt's, John Robinson, Sparks, Downie, Sells-Floto, and the 101 Ranch Wild West were part of the 29 outdoor show business images sold that year. Twenty-seven side show subjects were also listed.

A 1935 list included twenty-seven Ringling-Barnum views, a Walter L. Main spec group, a Milliken Bros.



Kelty right, with western performer Jimmy Foster in 1932. Pfening Archives.

group, four Cole Bros., six Hagenbeck-Wallace-Forepaugh-Sells, Frank Wirth's Elks Circus, a W.P.A. Circus group, and five of Col. W. T. Johnson's World Champion Rodeo.

Kelty took a number of photos of the 1938 Ringling-Barnum show. If he took any circus pictures after 1940, none have survived. Hard up

The Wonerland side show at Coney Island in 1929. Harck collection.





for money, Kelty sold a large number of his negatives to Knickerbocker Photos. This company maintained offices in New York City and Brooklyn. Knickerbocker advertised and sold Kelty's prints.

In 1955, while researching the Col. Tim McCoy Wild West show, the author visited the Brooklyn location and purchased a number of Kelty images.

Kelty spent many hours at a mid-town New York bar where he hocked his remaining negatives to cover his tab.

The negatives at the bar were later purchased by Howard Tibbals. He found that many of them were separated by newspapers. Unfortunately the paper was stuck to the many of the negatives. The newspaper was washed off by water, allowing the negatives to be printed.

Tibbals reproduced a selection of Kelty photos and offered them for sale. In due time the nitrate film deteriorated and the negatives were lost forever. In 2002 a coffee-table book of Kelty photographs was published. Editors Miles Barth and Alan Siegel selected 46 Kelty images from the Ken Harck, Tibbals and Pfening collections for a museum exhibition at the International Center of Photography in New York from September 13 to December 1, 2002.

Little was known about Kelty's later life until an article by Ellen Warren appeared in the *Chicago Tribune* on February 7, 2002. She wrote, "Cleaning out the small, North Side apartment after his father died, young Ed Kelty found one--and only one--clue pointing to his dad's intriguing and sometimes, bizarre career.

"It was 1967, and going through the few possessions that Edward J. Kelty left behind, his son found a single camera lens. There were no photos. No negatives. No cameras. The lens was the only hint of Kelty's 20 rollicking years as a traveling circus photographer.

"Today, nearly 36 years after his death at age 79 in Chicago Veteran's Research Hospital, E. J. Kelty's circus photographs are on the covers of two coffee-table art books. The most recent volume is devoted exclusively to Kelty's strangely compelling

images of side show freaks, clowns and other circus exotics.

"What of the man behind the camera? In the early 1940s, the hard drinking New York photographer and proprietor of Century Photography sold some of his negatives, unloaded the rest to settle a bar tab and moved half-way across the country to Chicago where he seems to have had no prior ties.

"Most puzzling of all: As far as anyone knows, he never took another picture.

"Collectible and rare, E. J. Kelty photos show extraordinary technique, but what makes the pictures irresistible is the subject matter: The bearded lady, the snake charmer, the sword swallower, here a woman with no limbs, there a pinheaded man, giants, mid-gets tiny, tinier, tiniest.

"They are hopelessly politically incorrect by today's standards, but 'there's some kind of vicarious thrill that comes through those photographs. You just can't not look at them,' says curator Miles Barth who wrote the biographical essay for the recently published book, *Step Right This Way. The Photography of Edward J. Kelty* (Barnes & Noble, 144 pages, \$30).

"After serving in the Navy in World War I, Kelty followed circuses in his specially outfitted little truck where he could process his film on the spot.

## CATALOGUE OF THE EDWARD J. KELTY Collection of CIRCUS PICTURES Side Show and Wild-West Pictures

### Circus Pictures

(12 x 20 and 11 x 14 Inches)

All Pictures \$1.25 Each. (\$12.00 Dozen)  
Unless Otherwise Priced

#### SEASON 1924

Ringling-Barnum Clowns.  
Ringling-Barnum Congress of Freaks.  
Ringling-Barnum Side Show Band, Freaks and Banners.  
Ringling-Barnum Band in Spec. Uniforms. 5 Ft. Long. \$3.00  
Col. Gulliver, giant. Tom Ton and Major Mite. Ringling-Barnum.

#### SEASON 1925

Ringling-Barnum Side Show Band.  
Ringling-Barnum Congress of Freaks.  
Sparks Group, Panoram Picture.  
Sparks' Cook House Gang.  
Luna Park Circus, Coney Island, N. Y.  
Cheyenne Days, Wild West. Coney Island, N. Y.

#### SEASON 1926

Ringling-Barnum Garland Entry, Madison Square Garden, N. Y. C.  
(Made with 18 Automatic Flashlights) \$2.00  
Ringling-Barnum Congress of Freaks.  
Ringling-Barnum Front Door Staff.  
Ringling-Barnum Band, (Concert Formation.) Madison Square Garden.  
Walter L. Main Circus Group.  
Walter L. Main Circus Side Show Group.  
Sparks' Circus Group.—Panoram.  
101 Ranch Spec. Line-Up.—Panoram.  
101 Ranch Group.—Panoram.  
Sells-Floto Group.—Panoram.  
Sells-Floto Baggage Stock.—Panoram.  
Sells-Floto - Buffalo Bill Wild West Line-Up.—Panoram.  
"Ready For Spec."—Ringling Back Yard. 8x10—75c

#### SEASON 1927

Ringling-Barnum Concert Band.  
Ringling-Barnum Clowns.  
Ringling-Barnum Congress of Freaks.  
John R. Agee and his Horses. Luna Park.  
John R. Agee and his Bull. In Front of Hippodrome, New York City.  
John R. Agee and his Bull. On Broadway, New York City.  
The Mighty Haag Shows' Group.  
Christy Bros. Group.  
Christy Bros. Side Show Group.  
J. B. Everette James and his Band. Christy Bros.  
Downie Bros. Group.  
Walter L. Main Group.  
Hagenbeck-Wallace Group.  
"Bert Cole and his Banners." Hagenbeck-Wallace.  
Hagenbeck-Wallace Clowns.  
Hagenbeck-Wallace—Cheyenne Bill's Wild West Line-Up.  
Tom Veasey working Weir's Elephants.  
Sells-Floto Group.  
Sells-Floto Clown Band.  
Sells-Floto — Buffalo Bill Wild West Line-Up.

A page from a Kelty sales list. Pfening Archives.

He even slept there.

"Once in love with picture taking, Kelty spent the last third of his life in Chicago doing something else.

"What to make of those lost years?

"Probably we'll never know," says Ed, the older of Kelty's two sons.

"Probably, he's right.

"The Kelty trail comes to a dead end in Chicago," says Barth.



'Originally, I was going to call my essay, "The Mysterious Edward Kelty and Century Photographers."'

"I did not find a single photograph in all of my research taken by Kelty after the date of 1940 . . . It's as though he was driving 80 or 90 miles per hour and his career just shattered. There were no pieces to pick up," says Barth.

"From the bits he left behind in his tidy apartment, Kelty seemed to have had eclectic interests and a wide circle of acquaintances. He was 'A big schmoozer. A guy who chatted with people,' says his son.

"Is it too much to hope that some of those people, reading this, can shed light on the last chapter of his life?

"If he were alive today, E. J. Kelty would have just turned 115. He was born in Denver on Jan. 23, 1888.

"His wife, Annette, a secretary in his successful Century Photography business, was only in her late teens when she married the boss, who was 34. She, too, is long dead. Though they never divorced, they had little contact after 1933, the year their second son, Charles Herbert ("Herb") Kelty was born. The brothers grew up knowing their father was a photographer who made pictures of the circus, but little more than that. A handful of his pictures remained with the family when the parents split up.

"Both of Kelty's sons are still alive. Herb, 69, met his father only twice, after he had grown up. Ed, 72, has

John Agee and his horses at Luna Park, Coney Island in 1929. Tibbals collection.

only a few memories from the times before his father left for good. As an adult, like Herb, he only met with his estranged father twice.

"The one-paragraph obituary that ran in the *Chicago Tribune* on May 20, 1967, offers nothing to untangle the Kelty mysteries. In less than 100 words, the obit describes Kelty as a 'retired professional photographer who once was the official photographer for Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey circus.'

"Even that is not quite so. Kelty was under contract to that circus, meaning he had to pay Ringling Brothers a commission for every circus picture he took. But he was not a circus employee, which had several of its own photographers who specialized in behind-the-scenes candid.

"Edward Kelty was the Cecil B. DeMille of still photography," writes Barth, 'Assembling and directing large groups of circus performers and staff.'

"Using a camera and accessories that could weigh a back-breaking 50 pounds, some of Kelty's eerily detailed big top and banquet photos—he did weddings and parties, too—have up to 1,000 people in them.

"You've got all this detail and kind of glamour and outrageousness," says Ken Harck, one of the nation's premier collectors of circus photos and memorabilia—especially side shows—who owns more than 100 Kelty pictures.

"Harck, who lives in a suburb southwest of Chicago, says, 'Kelty was a great photographer. I'm sure he didn't think of himself as an

artist. He was just some hack going around taking pictures and developing them in the back of his car.'

"I was absolutely astounded when I found out anybody

collected his stuff,' Kelty's son, Ed, a psychologist, said recently during an interview in his Maryland home.

"It was by sheer chance that he found out his father's pictures were anything special, he recalls. That was in 1985, when he walked into a circus exhibit at the National Geographic Society in downtown Washington, D.C.: 'I said, "I know that picture!"'

"After his parents separated, son Ed says, 'Mom was very closed mouthed. The best she could say was he had problems with alcohol. She presumed that it was post-traumatic stress from his war experience. It was called shell shock then. She thought that the World War I experience affected him so he used alcohol more than he should have.'

"Both Herb and Ed Kelty tell similar stories of their separate meetings with their father in Chicago in the 1950s and '60s.

"Herb, an inventor and businessman now living in northern California, says he met his father for the first time in 1952 when, coincidentally, they both were living in Chicago.

"Herb was in his second year at the University of Chicago when his mother came to visit. 'It was weird. It was unexpected. After 19 years, my mom says, "Hey, do you want to meet your dad?"' Herb said.

"The three of them met for lunch at the coffee shop of the Miramar Hotel, 6218 S. Woodlawn Ave., where, as Herb Kelty recalls, 'virtually nothing' came out about his father's life in Chicago. 'It was polite conversation. Superficial,' says Herb. 'I'm not going to interrogate someone, even to this day. I accept what they want to tell me.'

"The next report of Kelty in Chicago comes from son Ed who, attending a psychology association meeting here in the 1950s, on a whim looked up his father in the Chicago phone book and called him. Father and son spent the day together, as the older Kelty showed off his adopted city.

"He would talk about politics. He would talk about world affairs. He would talk about anything—but himself. I guess I wasn't ready to interview him, either. At this point, I had no idea he'd become a revered circus





photographer,' says Ed Kelty.

"He talked about the city of Chicago, which he loved. We walked everywhere. He didn't own a car I remember he showed me a Maxfield Parrish mural in Chicago, in a bar [probably the now missing "Sing a Song of Sixpence" at the defunct Sherman Hotel at Randolph and Clark Streets]."

"We went to one place, we went in there and had a drink mainly so we could check out the restrooms. They were so heavily decorated, over the top, original artwork in the john,' Ed recalls.

"As you might expect from a man who spent years photographing circus freaks, 'He would know all these oddball things about the city, including the stones [from around the world, embedded] in the Tribune Tower. He really liked big cities,' Ed says.

"Herb Kelty recalls meeting his dad for the second, and last, time in Chicago in 1961. They had lunch at the Tropical Hut, then on 57th Street. 'We never got into any big

everything,' says Ed.

"In all their visits, the sons never saw where their father lived. 'I offered to come and meet him in his apartment,' says Ed, but the elder Kelty declined. 'In retrospect I would say he was quite defensive about how modest it was. He said, "There's nothing to see.'"

"Ed Kelty, his wife and his mother found this out firsthand in May, 1967, when they flew to Chicago for the photographer's funeral--Herb did not attend--and spent several days cleaning out the apartment at 3825 N. Pine Grove Ave., only a few blocks from Wrigley Field.

"Virtually everything the family knows now about Kelty's lost Chicago years--not much--comes from memorabilia that son Ed tucked



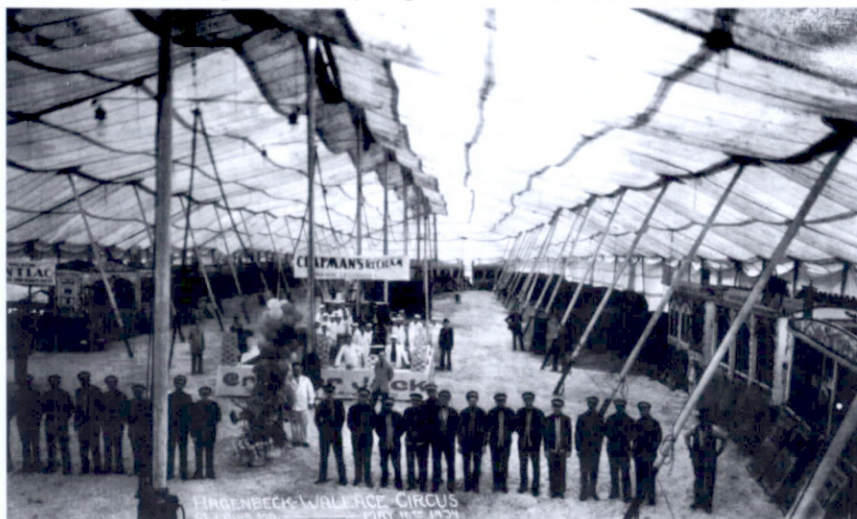
Ed Kelty and two friends on Hagenbeck-Wallace in 1934. Pfening Archives.

"Among the items on the table are five pin-on vendors' licenses, including one marked 'Wrigley Field Concessions,' another that says 'International Amphitheater' and one emblazoned 'Vendor 697 Hamm's Beer 45.' Neither son remembers his father as a baseball fan, though Ed says his father 'just loved sports events' and had photographed boxing matches at Madison Square Garden.

"It was in the basement of the old Madison Square Garden, only blocks from the various Century studio locations where Kelty worked, that he probably made his most famous photograph, the 1929 'Congress of Freaks' of the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey circus.

"That weirdly transfixing picture is on the cover of the 2000 book *One Man's Eye: Photographs from the Alan Siegel Collection* and appears in the *Step Right This Way* companion book to the recent show of Kelty photos at New York's International Center of Photography.

"Going through membership cards, Ed found three addresses for his father. The first, where he was registered to vote in 1942, is 112 E. Superior St., now the location of the Neiman Marcus store. Next comes 3728 N. Fremont St., the only one of the buildings still standing, a handsome, three-story stone front with double oak and glass doors. Kelty's voter registration cards with this address near Wrigley Field span



The Hagenbeck-Wallace menagerie in 1934. Pfening Archives.

communications thing,' Herb says, but he did learn 'E. J. was working at a ball park, Wrigley Field. As far as I know, he was selling stuff in the stands.'

"The final first-person account comes from the late '60s, when son Ed visited with his father not long before he died. On their day together, 'I don't even know how he was able to pay, but he insisted on paying for

in his suitcase and took home as mementos of a father he barely knew.

"In his suburban Maryland home, Ed Kelty sets out on the kitchen table all the clues.

"There are union cards from Local 236 of the Athletic and Public Events Vendors union, spanning the years 1951 to 1966. These are the only indication of how E. J. Kelty was making a living for part of his time in Chicago, when most men would have retired. He would have been 63 to 78 years old.



1953 to 1962.

"A 1963 Wrigley Field Concession Employee's Identification card places Kelty at Cubs Park for that euphoric 1963 season--the only year between 1947 and 1967 when the team won more games (82) than it lost (80).

"One of the most intriguing finds was 'stacks and boxes filled with newspaper clippings and photocopies of newspaper articles about disasters in the United States: Bridges collapsing, earthquakes, tornadoes, major fires,' Ed Kelty says. 'Under the bed, everywhere, there were these newspaper things. We found a lot of notes, handwritten notes about the events. It seems he was putting together material for a book.'

"Before he entered the Navy to serve in WW I, E. J. Kelty worked as a reporter-photographer for the *San Francisco Examiner*, which would make writing a book a logical extension of his early newspaper career.

"Ed Kelty guesses that his father got interested in disasters after reading the extensive coverage of the 1944 Hartford, Conn., circus fire. The flare-up at the big top of the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus incinerated 167 matinee-goers, mostly women and children.

"Another possibility is that E. J. Kelty's war experience might have contributed not only to his drinking, but also to this peculiar scrutiny of cataclysmic events.

"Among his father's papers, Ed found a six-page typewritten journal that includes the account of a gruesome tragedy stemming from a fire on Nov. 11, 1918, when the elder Kelty was in the crew of a U.S. transport ship, the *Ophir*, in Gibraltar harbor. He writes of an American sailor who died, stuck in a porthole trying to escape the flames. 'From the hips down he was burned to a crisp.'

"This journal offers Kelty's own description of his passion for his photography, making it all the more puzzling why he seems to have abandoned his career and moved to

Chicago.

"Leaving the burning ship, Kelty writes, 'What I was most interested in saving were the pictures I had collected [taken] while in the service so I wrapped them securely and tied them inside my life jacket--and as it turned out they were the only things I saved.'



The Hagenbeck-Wallace lot in St. Louis in 1934. Pfening Archives.

"Among the 1940s, '50s and '60s membership cards Ed Kelty retrieved from his father's apartment are the Old Timers' Baseball Association, the Veteran Boxers Association of Illinois, American Legion First Aero Wing #836, the Illinois Veterans Commission, the Cook County Veterans Association and the Veterans of Foreign Wars, 1st Aero Wing #1234.

"Not even the oldest of old-timers in these groups remembers Kelty. For instance, 95-year-old Joe Murphy, an American Legion officer at every level in Illinois in the '50s and '60s, said he didn't know him.

"Similarly, 80-year-old Joe Molitor, who in 1969 succeeded his father as executive director of the Old Timers Baseball Association in Illinois, has no memory of Kelty. Molitor located records that list Kelty as a dues-paying member from 1961 to 1966. Fittingly for a big drinker, banquet programs list Kelty as a donor for the 'Roll Out the Barrel' free beer program at the Old Timers' annual big dinner.

"Although the vendors' union Kelty

belonged to is defunct, it was succeeded by the Service Employees International Union, Local 1. The local's vice president, Vince Pesha, says a fire destroyed the old records that might have helped fill in the blanks of Kelty's Chicago years.

"One provocative scrap that son Ed found among his father's effects was

inmate 'scrip' used like money and marked 'Cook County Jail.' 'It is not unlikely that he got picked up if he drank a lot,' says Ed. But, no police, court or jail records could be located.

"Photo collector Alan Siegel, chairman of a New York strategic branding company, has been a moving force behind the flurry of interest in Kelty, promulgating the photographer's work in the two books and the exhibit in New York.

"Siegel says he happened upon his first Kelty in 1975 when he was looking through a bin of low-value photos at an auction at Sotheby's.

"It was the then-unknown 1929 'Congress of Freaks.' 'It was unbelievable to me. That picture made such an impact on me. I had to buy it,' says Siegel, recalling he paid \$200.

"The photo 'taken by a commercial photographer with a banquet camera' hangs in Siegel's home and 'holds its own' flanked by photographs worth hundreds of thousands by famed artists Diane Arbus and Irving Penn. Siegel says the 'Freaks' photo today probably would bring \$5,000 to \$10,000.

"Barth, who wrote the Kelty biographical essay and is curator of



Siegel's collection, says among the reasons for the scarcity of Kelty photos not only is the abrupt end to his photo career but the type of film he used. Nitrate-based, it was unstable, volatile, and unless properly conserved—it wasn't—turns to unusable jelly. Many of the negatives that Kelty used to pay a bar tab in New York ultimately landed in a Tennessee collection of circus memorabilia. The negatives disintegrated and were tossed in the trash, Barth says.

"But none of this explains why Kelty apparently stopped taking photos.

"Maybe it was as simple as Herb Kelty's analysis: 'He got wiped out in the Depression, and it takes a bunch of money, equipment. And you've got to get the stuff developed. The problem was he had a highly stylized type of photography, which was, lord knows, out of style.'

"But why did E. J. Kelty move to Chicago?

"Who knows?



The Marcellus Golden Statues on Ringling-Barnum in 1933. Pfening Archive.

"Herb Kelty hypothesizes it was because Chicago had a reputation as a place where a man could find some sort of work.

"Even the funeral chapel where Kelty was mourned, at 2838 N. Lincoln Ave., has been demolished so no records are available there. Ed Kelty remembers a lady friend, 'a senior citizen,' who was among the funeral attendees but can't recall a name.

"Kelty is buried in a veteran's cemetery in Rock Island, 150 miles southwest of Chicago. Ed Kelty's last memory of his dad—by then well into his 70s—was saying goodbye. He was 'still zippy' as he 'walked off jauntily.'

"As for those years in Chicago and the abrupt end of Kelty's now-heralded photo career, says the son, 'It's a total mystery.'"

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**PLAN TO ATTEND THE  
2007 CIRCUS HISTORICAL SOCIETY  
CONVENTION  
IN LAS VEGAS, NEVADA  
OCTOBER 1 TO 4**



# Blood May be Thicker than Water but Flukem Was the Life Saver for Gentry Bros. Circus

By Red Sonnenberg

When I was with Floyd King's Gentry Bros. Circus in the late 1920s they still used chandelier lights and I believe they were the last to use them. At some town in Kentucky the water wagon had already left for the runs and the chandeliers needed water, so we used some of the candy stand's flukem (lemonade) as you have to have water to mix with the carbide to make the lights.

Floyd King's favorite story concerned Montana Jack's one ring circus. When Floyd arrived in the circus quarters in Openbutt, Kentucky, rehearsals were in full blast and the flags were flying in the breeze, the sun was shining brightly, so it looked like a banner year for the old Colonel. Finally opening day arrived and they had a profitable day's business. But then, as it often does, the old evener arrived in the face of rain, rain and more rain. It descended day after day, and while the old Colonel and his loyal staff battled the elements, it was a losing proposition with Mother Nature.

For six weeks the battle raged with rain and no business. Finally the old Colonel gathered his faithful followers in the big top and told them the sad story, the end was at hand. "Boys and girls," he announced, "we done our best, the B.R. is shattered. The little that remains we will pay-off alphabetically."

So all lined up in front of the red wagon starting with A, but the B.R. only lasted to C, so the freight trains leaving town were loaded with troupers trying to find another show to light on. But the old Colonel, ever hopeful, got hold of a fresh B.R. and ran the usual ad in the *Billboard* for help in all departments, "Apply Montana Jack's One Ring Circus—Openbutt, Kentucky."

Finally the great moment arrived for rehearsals. Again the flags were

flying in the breeze. The band was playing and everyone was laughing and scratching again. Two old timers were sitting in front of the side show in the shade of the marquee.

In the distance a hack drove up and a man unloaded. He was spotted as a trouper as he hurried across the midway carrying two heavily-loaded keisters, as he came nearer he was recognized as last season's star of the center ring: Zone the Contortionist.

"Hi Zone," chirped the boss canvas man. Back came the quick answer, "Zone? Hell my name is Ajax."

With Floyd King's Gentry Bros. Circus there was a cowboy by the name of Harry Rooks, a good looking fellow who made a good looking cowboy with very nice wardrobe. One day after the parade came back on the lot, a good looking girl came over to me and asked if I would introduce her to that cowboy with the soulful eyes. I saw Harry a few years ago and his eyes aren't quite so soulful now.

A few years ago I went for a check-up at the Jackson Clinic in Madison, Wisconsin and when I had my blood test the only thing the croaker found wrong with me was a very high percentage of sawdust and hamburger from eating in circus cookhouses.

Floyd King told me this after listening to an old timer: a showman who has only been stranded and hungry once or twice feels as though he has never trouped.

And did you ever listen to a town-er's blood curdling story about the escape of the wild man from the circus?



The Gentry Bros. Circus water wagon. All illustrations are from the Pfening Archives.

Floyd King and a few of us old timers were cutting up some old time touches on the magic carpet in the Hotel Sherman in Chicago several years ago and the conversation finally got around to old time grifters. "Well Red will tell you," said Floyd, "Some of the grifters I had around my shows, had so much tonic they would of given Dale Carnegie an inferiority complex."

Bill Agnew, who had the petrified man on the Walter L. Main show, once ran into a bit of bad luck. When wagon carrying his attraction broke down at the runs, Bill was on the lot worrying getting his show open as the midway was loaded with people. When Floyd King came on the lot, Bill said, "Floyd, what will I do? Look at all these folks and I can't open?" "Don't worry, Bill," said Floyd, "just go into town to an undertaking parlor and rent a real stiff. These people won't know the difference."

A fella came into the side show of a gift outfit to have his fortune told. As he entered the mitt reader's booth, the madam who knows all and



sees all, said, "kindly be seated." As he sat down, the mitt reader demanded \$10. As he paid, the madam said this entitles you to ask two questions. "Isn't that a high price for just two questions," the man asked. "Yes," acknowledged the mitt reader, "next question, please."

Floyd King and his brother Howard were sometimes surrounded by opposition from the American Circus Corporation with its three shows and "Big Bertha" with her 100 cars. With this in mind Floyd would comment: "Circuses are like worms. They not only turn, but they do it without giving the proper signals."

I remember when Georgia had a law on the books that if the show train wasn't loaded before midnight on Saturday, the show would have to stay over until midnight Sunday. But the shows always made the deadline. I also remember the snacks joints the black folks had down yonder on show day where they sold chicken and fish. With them it wasn't so much a case in making a buck, but it was visiting day all around.

What would you think of a fella at the circus, with the thermometer reading 100 in the shade who had on a fur coat, wore spats, a straw hat and ordered an ice cream cone. It was only a clown in make-up. A few days ago I received a letter from a circus fan asking where the people slept on those one, two and three car shows. Here is the answer I sent him: "They slept in the winter time."

While playing the hill country of Kentucky with the Gentry show, we joined out a young gunsels named Billy Hill. Billy was a hillbilly so we naturally changed his name to Hilly Billy and he liked to go barefoot. Late in the fall when the weather turned chilly and with the camp fires were burning on the lot at night, Billy standing barefoot at one of the camp fires. Another show hand, said, "Hilly, you better move your foot; you are standing on a hot coal." "Which foot?" asked Hilly.

When the King brothers had their railroad shows in the twenties, they always used a big poster showing the inside of the big top with about twenty acts working and a big tip in the seats. One dismal day in the spring we were showing a town in the hills of Kentucky and business was lousy.

"Where are the people today," I asked Floyd, "On that big billboard downtown," he answered.

I was in Floyd's room in the hotel in the mining country of West Virginia with his Walter L. Main Circus. As we left, I turned off the lights. Floyd said, "Red, never turn off the lights in a hotel in coal mining country. If you leave them on, it helps the miners by using more coal and then more miners will come to the circus."



Floyd King liked to have his mug on Gentry Bros. posters. His brother Howard is at top right and Jess Adkins is at lower right.

During a clem in Lynch, Kentucky with Gentry Bros. some shots were fired and after the situation was back to normal again, one of the hands, who was called Windy, who always had all the clothes he owned on his back, said, "Mr. King, one of those bullets, went right through my hat. "What hat?" said Floyd, "Why Windy, you don't even have one."

The last big billing war was in 1959 when Cristiani Bros. and the Clyde Beatty-Cole Bros. circuses played Sterling, Illinois a week apart. Cristiani came in first, so Floyd King, Beatty-Cole general agent, had his billers plaster the town with "Wait for the big show" paper and also ran full page ads in the *Sterling Gazette* saying, "Wait

the big show." The day Cristiani was in Sterling, I was in a drug store talking to Bill Lewis, who had the downtown sale ticket for Cristiani. While talking, two ladies came in, stopped and looked at Bill's ticket sign. One lady said, "Oh Lucille, are we going to the circus?" Lucille replied, "Naw, I'll wait for that big show coming next week."

Art Borella, the great old time clown, went from one of the big railroad shows to one of Floyd King's ten car turkeys, and Floyd asked him how he liked the trouping with a small show. "It isn't so small when I make all of those trips around the hippodrome track in all of those walkarounds," Art answered.

One season, Frank Braden, the great Ringling press agent, was covering the unloading of the bulls in the Mott Haven yards in New York City. A reporter for one of the neighborhood papers asked Frank if he could get some elephant cannon balls, as he wanted to play a gag. Frank took him over to the bull car and told him to help himself, which the reporter did and he put them in a beat up old straw suitcase. Some bull hand who had helped load the cannon balls in the keister thought he would have a little fun and went and told the cops that the man had a bomb in the keister. So the cops stopped the reporter and asked what he had in the keister. "Bull shit," answered the reporter, so the cops slugged, then opened the keister and sure enough there was bull shit in the keister.

A little turkey used to play around the Carolina's called Diamond Jim's Circus. When he visited the Ringling show, I asked Jim how he made out with his small troupe. Jim said, "I do this, Mrs. Jim does that, young Jim does another and the whole damn family does something and then Diamond Jim takes in the scratch."

The Windy Van Hooten Circus was the only circus I ever heard of, that you could buy big show tickets everywhere but the red wagon, as everyone was busy side walling people, including Windy. Of course, this circus existed only in Starr DeBelle's imagination and the pages of the *Billboard*.

The John Robinson Circus was playing down yonder, where it was a



great favorite and the show had plenty of pastimes and amusements of the old west.

Doc Palmer, who had the side show on Tammen and Bonfils's Sells-Floto Circus, was the greatest on making homemade freaks. When Poncho Villa and his Mexican outlaws raided Columbus, New Mexico in 1916, an Associated Press report appeared in the *Denver Post*, which Tammen & Bonfils also owned, that among the refugees following the American army was a two headed man. H.B. Gentry, Floto show manager, sent Clint Finney down to Mexico to bring back this two-headed man for the Sells Floto sideshow.



Doc Palmer's "two-headed man," on the Sells-Floto Circus

Finney found this fellow, but he didn't have two heads. What he had was a big tumor on the top of his noggin. After Finney wired H. B. this disappointing news, Gentry wired back to bring him on and "we will have Doc Palmer gaff another head on him." When the Mexican arrived in Denver, Doc made a small head and fitted it over the tumor. That was my first season on a circus and I used to watch the people in the side show and hear them say, "see his eyes move," which of course they never did.

Another freak Doc gaffed was a couple of good-looking twin girls he called the Honduras Siamese twins. He made a flesh-colored corset-like thing with flesh colored tubing which the girls would put on. They would

expose part of it to the public and they sure looked like the real McCoy. I was only a gunsel then and went for it myself until a couple of days after joining out. I was going through the car the girls slept in and saw that one was in an upper berth and the other in a lower.

During the 1933 World's Fair in Chicago Doc gaffed the whale they had there. It was made out of paper mache. Tommy Green, an old-time showman, was the lecturer on the whale at the fair and he told many a lie about how they captured it on the high seas. Doc also made an octopus out of sponge rubber and had him in a tank. They used a groaner giving out a howl every once in a while. Doc had at one time Palmer Bros. Circus which changed owners and titles more times than any other show I knew of. At different times the show was called Howe's Great London Circus, Lincoln Bros., Palmer Bros. Circus, Golden Bros., and Lee Bros. Circus, all good solid grifters.

The most serious man I ever met was John Ringling North. In Canton, Ohio, two towns before we closed the canvas era of "Big Bertha" in Pittsburgh in 1956, he came into the menagerie which was side walled and looked like hell. He circled it twice and if I could read a man's mind, I would say, he was thinking "this can't be Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey, the Greatest Show on Earth."

Seldom is objection voiced to cherry pie, and never by a 1st of May who thinks it is something with two crusts and full of cherries. Another beginner thought circus life would be free and easy, soon learned that nothing is free and it's not easy. The really talented circus agent is one who retires to an apartment on a crack streamliner, and still makes people think he's undergoing the hardships of circus life. When I saw a woman sidewall with a baby carriage and three kids on "Big Bertha" that last season under canvas, I knew we didn't have long to go. Present-day troupers who don't mind missing a few pay days, do so because they had been persuaded and not because they have previous experience with it. It's far less prevalent now than in the old days.

The last season under canvas for

"Big Bertha," the so-called management was hiring a lot of 1st of May or nine day wonders, one of whom was supposed to be an efficiency expert. The first day on the job, clipboard in hand, he started following George Werner, the canvas boss. George was busy getting the top in the air which was quite a problem with the shortage of help. Once in a while the expert would stop and write something on his board. Finally George let out a roar at him, well I will have to censor George's remarks, but that was the last of him following George.

This reminds me--arguments between bosses and help aren't decided by who is right but who is left. Remember those old fashioned words we used to hear "The show comes first." A boss canvas man is a slave to his job. When he walks through a hickory grove he thinks of nothing but tent stakes. On closing day on the Ringling show, when shaking hands with a boss to say so long, you had something to look forward to if he said, "I'll see you in the Garden."

The biggest faker of them all was none other than old P. T. Barnum, who had been faking freaks a hundred and fifty years before. One of his fake freaks was a black woman he called Joice Heth who he exhibited in 1835, claiming she was 161 years old. Barnum also claimed she had been George Washington's nurse. Barnum did not gaff her, but he gaffed documents which said she was 161 years old. When she died a year later, a famous surgeon did an autopsy of her and said she was about 80 years old at the time of her death. Another freak that was really gaffed was a thing he called the Feejee Mermaid. He bought it from a sea captain. It was made from the head of a monkey and the body of a fish.

Arthur Hoffman, side show manager with the Walter L. Main show, had as two of his attractions an ossified or petrified man and a lady who did sculpturing. As the season wore on a romance started between the two and they got married. It didn't work out, and they landed in the divorce courts in less than a year. In later years Arthur liked to say, "He had a heart of stone and she was a real chiseler." He added, "They got



what they deserved, they got each other."

Bert Bowers one of the owners of The American Circus Corporation, never liked to visit another show. He always said he always saw something around another show that he could not have or get.

On the big shows route cards when the show made a big jump they would put on the cards "Enroute." One season we played Denver and made a big jump to Salt Lake City and the route card after Denver said "Enroute." We had a new girl in the office in New York and when she sent me my payroll check, she sent it to Enroute, Colorado. The payroll was a little late arriving that week.

Years ago when a circus played Mississippi you had to have a license for every concession. With the Walter L. Main show we beat that by putting all of the concessions under a big pit show top. During World War II a displaced person was one who lost his home on account of the ravages of war, but a displaced person around a circus was most any native who, when turned out of his apartment for non-payment of rent, had to join a circus to get a place to sleep. Then there was the small town merchant who goes to the circus to see how many of his customers have money to waste on shows but not to pay their bills.

The circus grapevine traveled

Roland Butler



faster than Western Union. I asked Possum on the big show what was the happiest days of his tramping life. He answered "When I was young and foolish enough to say yes mam to a 1st of May ballet girl." Another time someone stole Possum's long-handled underwear from his accommodations on the upper shelf. He said, "This is a sure sign of an early winter."

Boston was a very good town for selling programs, and while playing the Boston Garden with the Ringling show during the rush of the come-in, I would let the customers make their own change and I never would wind up short. In fact, I would be a little over, but New York City was just the opposite.

Joe Trosey had the bugs, chameleons, on "Big Bertha" and Boston was a very good bug town. In Boston the Garden, the Manger Hotel and the North Station were all in the same building. Joe always stayed at the Manger and would make up his bugs in his room. The maids would tell Joe that they would find bugs all year long in different rooms. During the run of the circus in the Garden he had a stand in North Station and he would sell almost as many bugs to the traveling public as he did in the Garden. Joe was a great guy. A few years ago he came to the Boston Garden to work the rodeo with bugs and while signing the register at the Manger Hotel he dropped dead of a heart attack.

Once in Chicago a kid bought a bug from Joe and after the show left the kid ran an ad in *Chicago Daily News*, telling about buying a bug at the circus and that his bug was lonesome and would someone please tell him where to buy another.

I happened to read the ad and showed it to Joe, so Joe sent the kid six bugs.

Who remembers when the *Billboard* ran an ad about every week from Rixton, the Barnum of the sticks? Who remembers during the war that rooms were so scarce that mission stiffs were wiring ahead for rooms in flop-houses?

You could write a book on Roland Butler, the press agent. Roland at one time put up a very sarcastic sign in the press



Walter L. Main

car in Ringling's Sarasota winter quarters warning all the phonies and fakers and other pests who tried to infest the press car to stay away. I would visit the press car about every day if only for the laughs, and the education it gave me in the fine art of cussing. The first time I saw the sign I feigned mock horror, but Roland assured me it did not mean me. Just about that time in came some phony with a phonier press card. Well, some 1st of May might read this and I would not want to corrupt him by telling him what Roland called that faker. He also had a small peephole in a door behind which Roland worked. When a visitor arrived he would always peep through this hold and size up the visitor, and if he was a phony he would be ready for him.

My favorite Roland Butler story is the one about him and the fellow named Bob who was the keeper of Lotus the hippo. About every time Roland and a newspaper photographer would come through the menagerie, the keeper would say to the hippo, "Open up Lotus." He would put part of his head in the hippo's mouth and want his picture taken. After taking his picture several times, it finally got to be a bore with Butler. He would say to the keeper "Not this time Bob," but Bob kept it up. The next time Butler came through and Bob said "Open up Lotus." Butler said, "Bob, that is old; you'll have to think of something dif-





Lotus and his keeper on Ringling-Barnum.

ferent."

"What do you suggest, Mr. Butler," Bob asked. Butler said, "Try sticking your head up his ass the next time."

I always admired the humbleness of the late, great clown, Paul Jung, who would say when away from the lot, "Here you see Paul the man, in my trunk on the lot is Paul the clown." Two of the humblest, but greatest, artists I ever knew, were Frank Shepard and Albert Powell.

Walter L. Main was often asked if he was on the battleship Maine, if he ever had a circus in Skowhegan, Maine, and if he ever rode the Spanish main or the bounding main, if he was related to Ledger T. Main. Of course the answer to all these questions was no, but he lived on Main Street in Geneva, Ohio. He was born on Friday, July 13, entered circus business on Friday, May 13, 1879, traveled 13 years overland, then sold his mud show at auction on January 13th, then went on rails and the first year used 13 cars, enlarged it ever since and the Main circus never had a losing season. With the wagon show, Main and his people slept in hotels. Main would occupy room 13 when possible.

With the coming of the railroad the circus came to Marshfield, Oregon. That day, September 25, 1916, the courts, banks, stores and schools closed. It was a red letter day for the people in Marshfield when Sells-Floto, the first big circus, pitched its tents there. A few days before in the courthouse they were trying to select

a jury in a murder trial. Hour after hour the lawyers wrangled to get a jury together as the clock turned its way towards adjournment time. The judge leaned forward in his chair. "Gentlemen," he said as he turned to the attorneys, to the accused and to those already chosen on the jury, "I am sorry that we were not able to obtain this jury today, for this means that we will not have it now before Tuesday night."

"Begging your honor's pardon," came the voice of an attorney. "You mean Monday night, don't you?"

"Tuesday," corrected his honor. "There will be no court Monday. Owing to the coming of the circus to Marshfield, there will be no court Monday." Everything closed up tighter than a drum and all went to the circus. I showed Marshfield, now called Coos Bay, 29 years later in 1945 with the Russell Bros. Pan Pacific Circus and we had a very big day.

While riding the New York City subway while there with the Ringling circus, a man sitting near me offered a lady his seat, "You must be from Boston," she said, "they have better manners there." The man said, "Indeed I am, but you," he said, "must be from New York." The lady asked how he knew. "In Boston," he said, "You would have said thank you."

While working on the movie *The Greatest Show On Earth* being filmed at the old Sarasota winter quarters, George Barnes, the cameraman for Paramount pictures and one of the best in Hollywood, said to me, "Red, you are a circus man and you are

on very friendly terms with all the circus people from top to bottom, like one big family. I sure wish Hollywood was like that."

During the flood of the Ohio River in 1937, Jess Adkins and Zack Terrell, owners of the Cole Bros. circus, received a telegram at their quarters in Rochester, Indiana from Admiral Grayson of The American Red Cross, asking if they could aid in helping the refugees. In a matter of hours, they made up a special train of sleeping cars and flats loaded with cookhouse and dining equipment to feed thousands of flood victims daily and left for Jeffersonville, Indiana.

You never have been a real trouper until you have slept in a three high berth, closed the season broke, been left on the lot, left your season's B.R. in the privilege car and lived through a blow down and grabbed the business end of a stub puller, and I might add, felt the governor's cane.

Red Fowler, who was in the red wagon on the Buck Jones Wild West Show, told me that one season when he was in the red wagon on the Al G. Barnes circus, they had a 99 cent general admission ticket and that he made a nice buck just keeping the penny change. Red smoked Cube cigarettes. I wonder what ever happened to them. A good winter quarters cook can cook something special with a can of beans.

My first circus was Sells-Floto owned by Tammen and Bonifils, who also owned the *Denver Post*. I joined out in Aurora Illinois, and my first job was handling six half breeds called Heinies-Zebras crossed with jack asses. After one week of that, I said to myself, this isn't for Red and I got a job with Happy Brannon who had charge of the candy stands. I was

The Buck Jones Wild West train.





a candy butcher from then on. I always handled money around a circus, as I found out if you handle money around a circus, some of it will stick with you.

One of the reasons I joined my first circus was that I read an ad "Help Wanted," show going to California. Then, as I went on the lot, I smelled that appetizing aroma of bacon frying in the cook house and I had a bad case of missed meal cramps. After the show closed, I really went to California to find a climate to suit my clothes after blowing my B.R. being a smart guy. The shrill note of the steam calliope got to me a little that first season but I never joined the circus because I thought it was a way to keep from working. After a few years, I was having a good time. I knew perfectly well what it was worth, good fun, so I thought I would enjoy it while it lasted and made it a way of life.

When I was a kid and joined Sells-Floto I never realized I was embarking on a lifetime career, but I was a gunsel. I always liked school but schools teach economics by the book; circuses practice by guess. And then I wondered who started the old gag that red lemonade was discovered when a kinker rinsed his red tights. Circus isn't bad. It enables one to get away from the humdrum of every day life into a life where hardly any two seasons are the same. During that first season I learned to pronounce the word marquee as "markay" so I was getting to be a real trouper. I would rather work on a circus for free, than a relative for a salary. I found out early it isn't always the best dressed man on a show who is the most valuable and I always said: "Faith and good cheer, next season may be better."

That showman who first joined me out, didn't mention much money, but promised something to write home about. I also got to hear the band play, with plenty of ups and overs and ham hocks and bumble bees in the cookhouse, not to mention those gorgeous damsels doing the chambermaids' frolic, I also wanted to know after looking at pictures of old time circus founders if they had mustache cups in those days. It was a great comfort to find out that one can

be a success without being pictured with sideburns or a handle-bar mustache. Another thing I learned was that privilege car food isn't the thing; it's the gravy and soppings that count. Regardless of the number knocking the cookhouse I was never on a show where they boycotted it. It didn't take me long to learn to hang on a guy line during a storm because my bread and butter depended on it. It was a nice omen to close my second season with money in my pocket, nice that the chilly winds didn't get me.

I learned fast that a rainy day in August is just as troublesome as one in May. I got this advice from a ticket seller: occasionally the cake crop may be short, but short or long cake is always sweet. I noticed the words "generally useful" on show contracts covered a lot of sins. The salaries were always kind of low on most circuses, but they gave you a good chance if you knew the score.



Grifter Johnny McNulty and Red Sonnenberg on Walter L. Main in 1928.

The nearest I ever came to being an actor (which I never wanted to be) was when I was a butcher with the Floto show. I would walk down the hippodrome track with a tray of popcorn and one of the clowns would run into me, knock me down and the popcorn with it. This was an old gag, but it always got a big laugh.

There was a character working in the wood working shop in quarters in Sarasota named Joe. He would come out of the gate every day, go across the road to Johnny Lowe's emporium, get a bottle of orange soda, go

back into quarters and say nary a word. But come Saturday, after they paid the hands at the cookhouse entrance at noon, Joe would high-tail it over to Johnny's, get a bottle of sweet Lucy and he would be the noisiest bastard the rest of Saturday. About two o'clock on Sunday afternoon the steam would wear off and Joe would go back in quarters and start all over again until the next Saturday.

There was a guy named Bull Hand Duffy, who lived in quarters, but drew unemployment compensation. Every Friday Duffy would put me on the arm for a half a clatter to go into town on the noon bus, sign up for his check, come back and give me back my half a buck. This went on for years, but finally Duffy broke the chain. He came as usual on Friday but this time he asked for two bucks, which I gave him, but he never asked me for money again and never repaid the two clatters. Duffy finally thought he had made a score and better quit while he was ahead.

My advice to those in trouble is to ask God's blessing, go where the band is playing, the lights are brightest, people are gay, (but not too gay) and thus shake off your mental troubles. Clint Finney, general agent of 101 Ranch Wild West Show and other troupes, always had a flower in his lapel and wore spats. Eddie Dowling, boss ticket seller on the John Robinson Circus, was another who always wore a flower.

My first night on the Christy Bros. Circus I had an upper berth to myself. About the time I was falling asleep I heard a funny hammer noise in the berth beneath me. I jumped up to see a fellow by the name of Henry Allen, a butcher in the cookhouse, had a cobbler's outfit and was putting on a pair of soles. Quite a number of years later while showing Houston with the Big Show Henry came on the lot and I asked him what he was doing. To my amazement, he said he had a little church and was a preacher.

While we were living in Chicago I went to visit Bennie Levine, an old circus friend and when I got home



my wife, Mildred, asked who else was there I said, "Well Gunny Sack, Bright Eyes, Mudcat Shorty, Jew Murphy, Two Chair Morris and Johnny Chaisseon. My wife said, "Is that all the name Johnny has?"

We played Eudora, Arkansas with the Walter L. Main show and one of the cookhouse hands came to the cars early and spread gasoline around his berth and then laid down and lit his pipe. Well, that was the end of him and the car burned. The car's porter got all the clothes out and threw them on the ground, but towners clouted everything. The hand wasn't trying to commit suicide; he just wanted to get rid of the bed bugs.

There was a butcher on Big Bertha who was called "Holy Water." He had a berth in the butchers' car, but he always rode the flats. He must have liked fresh air. The fastest and smoothest ticket seller I ever knew was Dee Newland who I trouped with on the Gentry and Walter L. Main shows. Dee died a few years ago a rich man in Long Beach, California. He was a native of Bethany Missouri. Most of the smart money boys I knew came from small towns. The best single-o talker was Arthur Hoffman on Hagenbeck-Wallace, Walter L. Main and Cole Bros. He was also the wittiest. The best all around short con man I met was Eddie Rogers. He made all the grift shows I was with. The fastest candy butchers were Barnum Hunsburger on Sparks and Rooney Gregory on the Big Show. The most mismanaged shows I was with were the Buck Jones Wild West and Big Bertha that last year under canvas.

By the law of averages, showmen make better resolutions during the cold of winter than during the heat of summer. Showmen have so many ups and downs in life, that when they are financially embarrassed very few even blush. I believe I am just a spoiled brat, after eating in some of the wonderful cookhouses of Laughing George Davis, Ollie Webb, George Blood, Mitt Carl and even Mother Walsh and Muldoon Hartman. When I go into a so-called high class restaurant nowadays and



Trainer Eugene "Arky" Scott with elephants Rubber and Babe, on Lee Bros. Circus in 1925.

have to eat the garbage they put out at very high prices, that is what I call the assassination of food.

While on cookhouses may as well give you this. As usual, a large crowd of natives gathered around a cookhouse to watch the actors eat. "Yes, Yes," loudly spoke one of the kinkers. "We eat like human beings; we even use a knife and fork." "We know that," shot back the village cut-up, "but what entertains us is the way you use them."

One of the common practices around circuses, especially the smaller ones, was to use the tall and uncut for a donniker if the lot was near a woods. One day that situation arose on Lee Bros. Circus. Big Joe, the broad-tosser in the side show, felt the call of nature and headed for the woods. When he finished he reached over to give his keister a proper wiping and picked up some leaves to do the job properly. The only trouble was he picked poison ivy, so Joe wound up with a pretty itchy keister for some time.

Another episode concerned Big

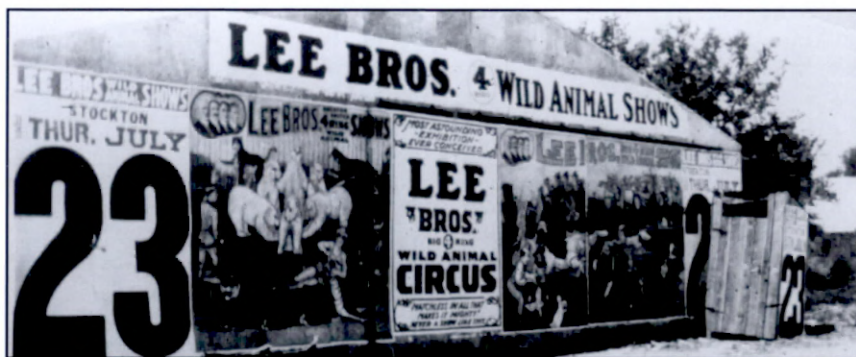
Joe, Hiram Garrison and me on Lee Bros. Circus. Hiram was outside man on Percy Burrows's joint in the sideshow and also doubled as 24 hour man back with the show. We were out in West Texas with the show, and the three of us, being early risers, were sitting in the privilege car having our morning coffee when the train came to a stop. Hiram stuck his kisser out of the window, and asked a townner, "Is this it?" to which the town-

er replied in the affirmative. So Hiram and Big Joe got off and headed for the main stem. I had not finished my coffee and before I could get off the train started up again leaving Joe and Hiram heading for town, only it wasn't the town we were playing so Joe and Hiram had to hire a hack and drive 52 miles to our show town. All the rest of the season they were know as the "Is this it?" twins.

Lee Bros. Circus was some circus. George W. Christy, who owned Christy Bros. Circus, bought the show from John Pluto of Baltimore, who bought it when Golden Bros. Circus went broke in North Little Rock, Arkansas. In the fall of 1924, Christy bought it from Pluto and changed the name to Lee Bros. He was reported to have paid \$17,000 for it. Imagine buying a fifteen car circus for that amount. Christy got his money back that fall down yonder. Bert Rutherford, Christy's general agent, routed the show by remote control and Christy very rarely visited it.

If I remember correctly the show stayed open until almost Christmas

A Lee Bros. Circus 1925 bill stand.





that year. The next year we opened in Port Arthur, Texas. One thing I remember that day was that the water wagon was freshly painted and leaked like a sieve. We went from eastern Canada to western Canada and did good business all through the country. I joined out a French Canuck in Sudbury, Ontario. When I asked him his name he said, "Just call me Bozo." So that is what he was. Bozo made a hell of a good circus hand, but he had one bad failing. He did not know how to count money, which I found out to my sorrow when he gave back more money to a customer than the customer gave him in the first place. Nevertheless, we were sorry to see him and the rest of the Canucks leave when the immigration inspectors swooped down on us that day in western Washington and deported all of them. Harry James, later a famous band leader, played cornet in the band. He was only a little gunsel then. Everett James, his father, was band leader on the show and his mother was a performer and a very good one. Our menagerie top had so many holes in it that at night it looked like stars over Bethlehem. The canvas hung down like shredded wheat. One night in Texas, we just left it on the lot.



A parade tableau and air calliope in the Gentry Bros. back yard.

We had an old geed up camel so another night, but this time in Oklahoma, we left the camel on the lot. I believe the town was Purcell, Oklahoma. I always wondered if that was a start of a zoo there. We Sundayed in a town called Wewoka, Oklahoma. While we were putting the show on the lot, which was the town ball field, the owner of the field said not to use the infield, but it was ok to drive over it as that was the

only way we could get on. The weather was nice that Sunday morning. Everything was hunky dory, but late that night it started to rain and it rained all night and was still raining Monday. So Louie Chase, the manager, called off the show. You should have seen that infield after the horses and elephants had pulled the wagons over it. This was a gift show, but I had one of my most happy seasons on it.

We played Little Rock, Arkansas with the Gentry show for 4 days on the same lot and we had to take the big top and everything else down every night. The reason was because the locals had a farmers market on the lot every morning.

In Big Bertha's last season, 1956, we played Meadville Pennsylvania without using the seats as the lot was too soft for the heavy seat wagons. We had a big advance sale, so we gave two shows without seats. They spread straw all around for the people to sit on, but after sitting on this for awhile they began to sink a little. So when they came out at the matinee everybody had a big round spot on their keister, especially the ladies with their colored dresses.

One season with the Gentry show we had a real clem in Harlan, Kentucky, and if any of you old-timers played Harlan with a gift show in those days you knew you were in a clem when you had one in Harlan. We finally roused the towners causing the clem. When Freddie Letner, the boss butcher who had the candy stands take [money] with him, and I made a short cut across a field to the train, when we ran into a mob of towners looking for the train to rock it and to take a few pot-shots at it with their roscoes [guns].

Freddie was scared to death and of course I didn't feel too good myself. Freddie said, "What will we do?" I said, "Don't get excited. We'll join them in the darkness." They didn't know if we were towners or show bums. When we reached the train we made a run for it, but I still have a souvenir scar on the back of my neck where one of the rocks landed.

Too bad circuses never gave purple hearts to those wounded in the line of duty.

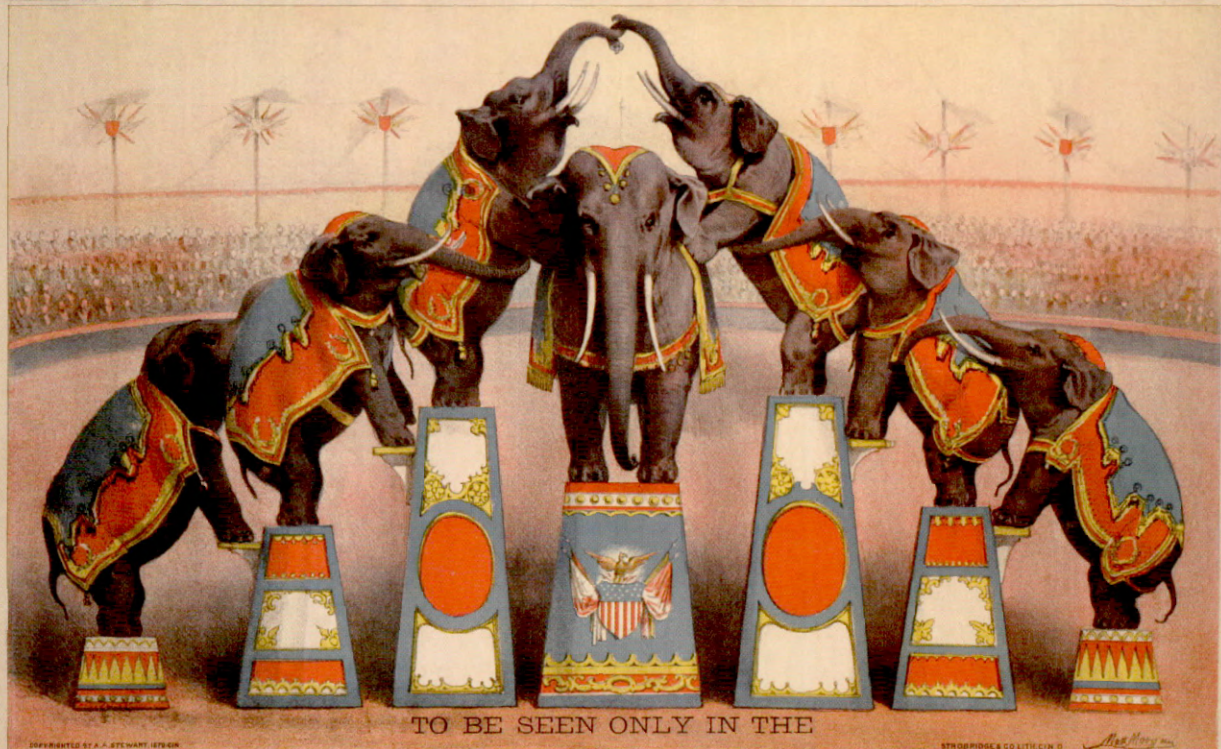
Al Copeland was manager of the Buck Jones Wild West Show. He was an ex-carnie and used to talk that carnie pig Latin. He always called me Edra and his favorite expression was "Edra, take a little and leave a little." I don't believe Al always lived up to those lofty ideals as he and Buck fell out later on.

A lot of circus fans blame John Ringling North for closing the Ringling circus under canvas. They say he made a Broadway production out of Big Bertha. Every small show copied it to their limited capacity and still do to the present time. I thought the show would have closed 10 or 15 years earlier if he hadn't changed the performance the way he did. I saw the nut get bigger every year and the income smaller and no business can operate long that way. I do not believe any man could successfully operate Ringling as a real big show under canvas. I wish I could. I had a very good job and made very big money. I told fellows working for me 8 or 9 years before we folded in Pittsburgh that in less than 10 years there would not be a Ringling circus like you see it now. I went from the M. L. Clark wagon show (and all those in between) to Big Bertha, so this isn't a 1st of May popping off. And now in closing I say: "There is still only one Big Bertha."

One of the things I would like to live over again is coming on the lot and seeing "Lowdown Red" Harvey Beach, the punk pusher or kid worker on Lee Bros. Circus, lining up his gunsels like a pied piper and holding school, telling the kids what they had to do. He would give every one a name like Blue Shirt, Torn Pants, Google Eyes, Four Eyes, Mamas' Boy, Pee Wee, Little Bit, Muscles and the usual Red, Whitey, Blackie etc. He really conned those kids and how they worked for Old Red. He would always pick the one he named Pee Wee to go to the nearest grocery store to get him his daily ration of Mail Pouch chewing tobacco. He might have been named Lowdown Red but Red was a gentleman of the old school and he was worth his weight in gold in getting up the old rag.



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